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in celebration of
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with
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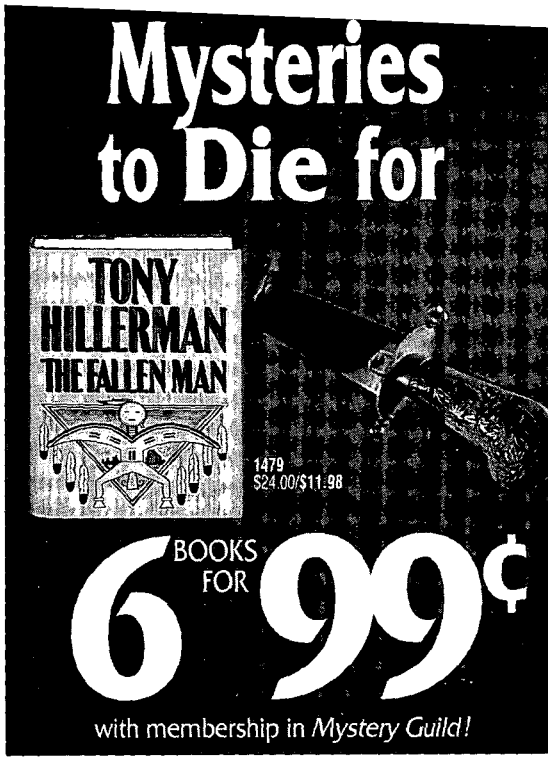

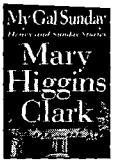

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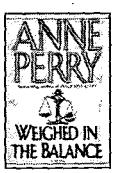

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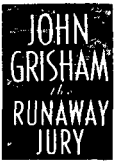

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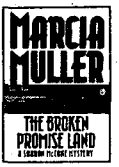

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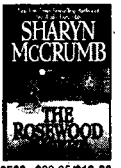

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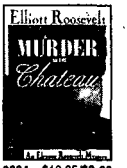

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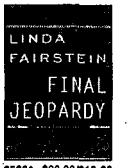

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Art by Darryl Elliott

THE LAST OPEN FILE

by Marcia Muller

First Case

The big Victorian slumped between its neighbors on a steeply sloping side street in San Francisco's Bernal Heights district: tall, shabby, and strangely welcoming in spite of its sagging roofline and blistered chocolate paint. I got out of my battered red MG and studied the house for a moment, then cut across the weedy triangular park that bisected Coso Street and climbed the front steps. A line of pigeons roosted on the peak above the door; I glanced warily at them before slipping under and obeying a hand-lettered sign that told me to "Walk Right In!"

It seemed an unnecessary risk to leave one's door open in this low-rent area, but when I entered I came face-to-face with a man sitting at a desk. He had fine features and a goatee, and was dressed in the flannel-shirt-and-Levi's uniform of the predomi-

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nantly gay Castro district; although his dark eyes were mild and friendly, he was scrutinizing me very carefully. I presented my business card—one of the thousand I'd had printed on credit at my friends Daphne and Charlie's shop—and his expression became less guarded. "You're Sharon McCone, Hank's detective friend!" he exclaimed.

I nodded, although I didn't feel much like a detective anymore. For the past few years I'd worked under the license of one of the city's large investigative firms; the day I'd received my own ticket from the state Department of Consumer Affairs, my boss had fired me for insubordination. At first I'd seen it as an opportunity to strike out on my own, but operating out of my studio apartment on Guerrero Street was far from an ideal situation; jobs were few, I was about to run out of cards, and my rent was due next Thursday. Yesterday I'd run into Hank Zahn, a former housemate from my college days at U.C. Berkeley. He'd asked me to stop by his law firm for a talk.

I'd hoped the talk would be about a job, but from the looks of this place I doubted it.

The man at the desk seemed to be waiting for more of a response. Inanely I said, "Yes," to reinforce the nod.

He got up and stuck out his hand. "Ted Smalley—secretary, janitor, and—occasionally—court jester. Welcome to All Souls Legal Cooperative."

I clasped his slender fingers, liking his smile.

"Hank's in conference with a client right now," Ted went on.

EQMM's publication of "The Last Open File" joins two stories Marcia Muller wrote as bookends to a collection featuring her much-loved protagonist Sharon McCone. Part one shows a young McCone in her first encounter with the staff at All Souls Legal Cooperative, the base of operations for nearly all her adventures in novels and stories, including the 1977 debut novel *Edwin of the Iron Shoes*. In part two Sharon moves to offices of her own. For more on this chapter in the San Francisco P.I.'s life, look for book seventeen, *The Broken Promise Land* (Mysterious Press, 1996). ¶

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"Why don't you make yourself comfortable in the parlor." He motioned to his right, at a big blue room with a fireplace and a butt-sprung maroon sofa and chair. "I'll tell him you're here."

I went in there, noting an old-fashioned upright piano and a profusion of books and games on the coffee table. A tall schefflera grew in the window bay; its pot was a pink toilet. I sat on the couch and immediately a coil of spring prodded my rump. Moving over, I glared at where it pushed through the upholstery.

Make myself comfortable, indeed!

Ted Smalley had disappeared down the long central hall off the foyer. I looked around some more, wondering what the hell Hank was doing in such a place.

Hank Zahn was a Stanford grad and had been at the top of his law-school class at Berkeley's Boalt Hall. When I'd last seen him he was packing his belongings prior to turning over his room in the brown-shingled house we'd shared on Durant Street to yet another of an ongoing chain of tenants that stretched back into the early sixties and for all I knew continued unbroken to this very day. At the time, he was being courted by several prestigious law firms, and he'd joked that the salaries and benefits they offered were enough to make him sell out to the establishment. But Hank was a self-styled leftist and social reformer, a Vietnam vet weaned from the military on Berkeley's radical politics; selling out wasn't within his realm of possibility. I could envision him as a public defender or an ACLU lawyer or a loner in private practice, but what was this cooperative business?

As I waited in the parlor, though, I had to admit the place had the same feel as the house we'd shared in Berkeley: laid-back and homey, brimming with companionship, humming with energy and purpose. Several people came and went, nodding pleasantly to me but appearing focused and intense. I'd come away from the Berkeley house craving solitude as strongly as when I'd left my parents' rambling, sibling-crowded place in San Diego. Not so with Hank, apparently.

Voices in the hallway now. Hank's and Ted Smalley's. Hank hurried into the parlor, holding out his hands to me. A tall, lean man, so loose-jointed that his limbs seemed linked by paper clips, he had a wiry Brillo pad of brown hair and thick horn-rimmed glasses that magnified the intelligence in his eyes; in the type of cords and sweaters that he'd always favored, he looked more the college teaching assistant than the attorney. He clasped my

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hands, pulled me to my feet, and hugged me. "I see you've already done battle with the couch," he said, gesturing at the protruding spring.

"Where did you get that thing—the city dump?"

"Actually, somebody left it and the matching chair and hassock on the sidewalk on Sixteenth Street. I recognized a bargain and recycled them."

"And the piano?"

"Ted's find. Garage sale. The same with the schefflera."

"Well, you guys are nothing if not resourceful. You want to tell me about this place?"

"In a minute." He steered me to the hallway. "Wait till you see the kitchen."

It was at the rear of the house: a huge room equipped with ancient appliances and glass-fronted cupboards; dishes cluttered the drainboard of the sink, a stick of butter melted on its wrapper on the counter, and a long red phone cord snaked across the floor and disappeared under a round oak table by a window that gave a panoramic view of downtown. A book titled *White Trash Cooking* lay broken-spined on a chair. Hank motioned for me to sit, fetched coffee, and pulled up a chair opposite me.

"Great, isn't it?" he said.

"Sure."

"You're probably wondering what's going on here."

I nodded.

"All Souls Legal Cooperative works like a medical plan. People who can't afford the bloated fees many of my colleagues charge buy a membership, its cost based on a scale according to their incomes. The membership gives them access to counsel and legal services all the way from small claims to the U.S. Supreme Court. Legal services plans're the coming thing, an outgrowth of the poverty law movement."

"How many people're involved?"

"Seventeen, right now."

"You making any money?"

"Does it look like we are? No. But we sure are having fun. Most of us live on the premises—offices double as sleeping quarters, and there're some bedrooms on the second floor—and that offsets the paltry salaries. We pool expenses, barter services such as cooking and taking out the trash. There're parties and potlucks

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and poker games. Right now a Monopoly tournament's the big thing."

"Just like on Durant."

"Uh-huh. You remember Anne-Marie Altman?"

"Of course." She'd been an off-and-on resident at Durant, and a classmate of Hank's.

"Well, she's our tax attorney, and one of the people who helped me found the co-op."

"Why, Hank?"

"Why a co-op? Because it's the most concrete way I can make a difference in a world that doesn't give a rat's ass about the little people. I learned at Berkeley that bombs and bricks aren't going to do a damned thing for society; maybe practicing law the way it was meant to be practiced will."

He looked idealistic and earnest and—in spite of the years he had on me—very young. I said, "I hope so, Hank."

He must have sensed my doubt and felt a twinge of his own, because for a moment his gaze muddied. Then he said briskly, "So, how's business?"

I made a rueful face, glancing down at my ratty sweater and faded jeans. The heels on my leather boots were worn down, and the last time it had rained, water leaked through the right sole. "Bad," I admitted.

"Thinking of looking for permanent employment?"

"With my references?" I snorted. " 'Doesn't take direction well, nonresponsive to authority figures, inflexible, and overly independent. Can be pushy, severe, and dominant.' That was my last review before the agency canned me. Forget it."

"Jesus, that could describe any one of us at All Souls."

"Maybe it's a generational flaw."

"Maybe, but it's us. You want a job here?"

"Do I want . . . *what?*"

"We're looking for a staff investigator."

"Since when?"

He grinned. "Since yesterday, when I ran into you in front of City Hall and started thinking about all the nonlegal work we've been heaping on our paralegals."

"Such as?"

"Nothing all that exciting, I'm afraid. Filing documents; tracking down witnesses; interviewing same; locating people, and serving subpoenas. Pretty dull work, when you get right down to it,

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but the after-hours company is good. We're all easygoing; we'd leave you alone to do your work in your own way."

"Salary?"

"Low. Benefits, practically nil."

"I couldn't live in; I've kind of OD'd on the communal stuff."

"We couldn't accommodate you, anyway. The only available space is a converted closet under the stairs—which, incidentally, would be your office. I might be able to raise the salary a little to help with your rent."

"What about expenses? My car—"

"Is a hunk of junk. But we'll pay mileage. Besides . . ." He paused, eyes dancing wickedly.

I remembered that look, from just before he'd raked in the pot at many a Durant Street poker game. "What?"

"I can offer you a first case that'll intrigue the hell out of you."

A steady job, bosses who would leave me alone, a first case that would intrigue the hell out of me. What more was I looking for?

"You've got yourself an investigator," I told him.

Hank's client, Marnie Morrison, was one of those soft, round young women who always remind me of puppy dogs—clingy and smiley and eager to please. A thinly veiled anxiety in her big blue eyes and the way most of her statements turned up as if she were asking a question told me that the puppy had been mistreated and wasn't too sure she wouldn't be mistreated again. She sat across from me at the round table and related her story—crossing and recrossing her bluejeaned legs, twisting a curl of fluffy blond hair around her finger, glancing up at Hank for approval. Her mannerisms were so distracting that it took me a few minutes to realize I'd read about her in the paper.

"His name, it was Jon Howard. I met him on the sorority ski trip to Mammoth over spring break. In the bar at the lodge where we were staying? He was there by himself and he looked nice and my roommate Terry, she kind of pushed me into going over and talking. He was kind of sweet? So we had some drinks and made a date to ski together the next day and after that we were together all the time."

"Jon was staying at the lodge?"

"No, this motel down the road. I thought it was kind of funny, since he told me he was a financier and sole owner of this company with holdings all over Europe and South America. I mean,

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the motel was cheap? But he said it was quieter there and he didn't like big crowds of people, he was a very private person. We spent a lot of time there because I was rooming with Terry at the lodge, and we did things like get takeout and drink wine?" Marnie glanced at Hank. He nodded encouragingly.

"Anyway, we fell in love. And I decided not to go back to USC after break. We came to San Francisco because it's our favorite city. And Jon was finalizing a big business deal, and after that we were going to get married." The hurt-puppy look became more pronounced. "Of course, we didn't."

"Back up a minute, if you would," I said. "What did you and Jon talk about while . . . you were falling in love?"

"Our childhoods? Mine was good—I mean, my parents are nice and we've always had enough money. But Jon's? It was awful. They were poor and he always had to work and he never finished high school. But he was self-taught and he'd built this company with all these holdings up from nothing."

"What kind of company?"

Frown lines appeared between her eyebrows. "Well, a financial company, you know? It owned . . . well, all kinds of stuff overseas?"

"Okay," I said, "you arrived here in the city when?"

"Two months ago."

"And did what?"

"Checked into the St. Francis. We registered under my last name—Mr. and Mrs. Jon Morrison?"

"Why?"

"Because of Jon's business deal. He'd made some enemies, and he was afraid they'd get to him before he could wrap it up. Besides, the credit card we were using was in my name." Her mouth drooped. "The American Express card my father gave me when I went to college. I . . . guess that was the real reason?"

"So you registered at the St. Francis and . . . ?"

"Jon was on the phone a lot on account of his business deal? I got my hair done and shopped. Then he hired a limo and a driver and we started looking at houses. As soon as the deal was finalized and his money was wire-transferred from Europe we were going to buy one. We found the perfect place on Vallejo Street in Pacific Heights, only it needed a lot of remodeling, we wanted to put in an indoor pool and a tennis court? So Jon wrote a postdated deposit check and hired a contractor and a decorator and then we

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went shopping for artwork because Jon said it was a good investment. We bought some nice paintings at a gallery on Sutter Street and they were holding them for us until the check cleared."

"What then?"

"There were the cars? We ordered a Mercedes for me and a Porsche for Jon. And we looked at yachts and airplanes, but he decided we'd better wait on those."

"And Jon wrote postdated checks for the cars?"

Marnie nodded.

"And the rest went on your American Express card?"

"Uh-huh."

"How much did you charge?"

She bit her lip and glanced at Hank. "The hotel bill was ten thousand dollars. The limo and the driver were over five. And there was a lot of other stuff? A lot." She looked down at her hands.

I met Hank's eyes. He shrugged, as if to say, "I told you she was naive."

"What did your parents have to say about the credit-card charges?" I asked.

"They paid them, at least that's what the police said. Or else I'd be in jail now?"

"Have you spoken with your parents?"

She whispered something, still looking down.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

"I said, I can't face them."

"And what about Jon?" I recalled the conclusion of Marnie's tale from the newspaper account I'd read, but I wanted to hear her version.

"A week ago? They came to our hotel room—the real-estate agent and the decorator and the salesman from the gallery. The checks Jon wrote? They'd all bounced, and they wanted him to make good on them. Only Jon wasn't there. I thought he'd gone downstairs for breakfast while I was in the shower, but he wasn't anyplace in the hotel, he'd packed his things and gone. All that was left was a pink carnation on my pillow."

It was difficult to feel sorry for her; she had, after all, refused to recognize the blatant signs of a con job. But when she raised her head and I saw the tears slipping over her round cheeks, I could feel her pain. "So what do you want me to do, Marnie?"

"Find him."

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"Aren't the police trying to do that?"

She shook her head. "Since the checks were postdated they were only like . . . promises to pay? The police say it's a civil matter, and all but one of the people Jon wrote them to have decided not to press charges. The decorator had already spent a lot of money out of pocket ordering fabric and stuff, so she hired a detective to trace Jon, but he's disappeared."

I thought for a moment. "Okay, Marnie, suppose I do locate Jon Howard. What then?"

"I'll go to him and get the money to pay my parents back. Then I can face them again."

"It doesn't sound as if he has any money."

"He must." To my astonished look she added, "All of this has been a terrible mistake. Maybe he ran away because his business rivals were after him? Maybe the big deal he was working on fell through and he was ashamed to tell me? When you find him, he'll explain everything."

"You sound as though you still believe in him."

"I do. I always will. I love him."

"She's got to be insane!" I said to Hank. Marnie Morrison had just left for the cheap residential hotel that was all she could afford on her temporary office worker's wages.

"No, she's naive and doesn't want to believe the great love of her life was a con artist. I figure meeting up with Jon Howard in his true incarnation'll cure her of that."

"Then you actually want me to find him?"

"Yeah. I'd like to get a look at him, find out what makes a guy like that tick."

As a matter of fact, so would I.

The recession-hungry merchants who had been taken in by the supposedly rich young couple were now engaged in various forms of face-saving.

Dealer Henry Richards of the Avant Gallery on Sutter Street: "Mr. Morrison was *very* knowledgeable about art. He asked all the right questions. He knew which paintings would appreciate and which would not. Had he followed through on the purchase, he would have had the beginnings of a top-flight collection. He may not have been rich, but I could tell he was well educated, and there's no concealing good breeding."

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Realtor Deborah Lakein of Bay Properties: "From the moment I set eyes on the Morrisons I knew something was wrong. At first I thought it was simply the silk-purse-out-of-sow's-ear effect: too much money, too little breeding. But they seemed serious and were very enthusiastic about the property—it's a gem, asking price one million three. In this market one doesn't pass up the opportunity to make such a sale. Of course, his deposit check was postdated like the others he wrote all over town, and when I finally put it through it was returned for insufficient funds. The same was true of the checks to the contractor and decorator and landscaper I recommended. Oh, I'm in hot water with them, I am!"

Salesman Donald Neditch of European Motors on Van Ness Avenue's auto row: "Well, our customers come in all varieties, if you know what I mean. You don't have to be a blueblood to drive one of these babies. All you need is the cash or the credit. The two of them were well dressed—casually but expensively—and they arrived in a limo. I could tell they hadn't had money for very long, though. He asked a lot of questions, but they were the kind you'd ask if you were buying a pre-owned model. About used cars, he was knowledgeable enough to sell them, but I'd bet the Mercedes for his wife was the first new car he ever looked at."

Claire Wallis, clerk in the billing office at the St. Francis Hotel: "No one questioned their charges because American Express was honoring them. There was a lot of room service, a lot of champagne and fine wines. Fresh flowers every day for the three weeks they stayed here. Generous tips added to each check, too. The personnel who had dealings with them tell me she was young and sweet; he was more rough at the edges, as you'd expect a self-made man to be, but very polite. Security had no complaints about loud partying, so I assume they were as well behaved in private as in public."

Wallis referred me to an inspector in the Fraud division of the SFPD who had taken a list of calls made from the "Morrisons' " suite and had them checked out by the department before it became apparent that no criminal statutes had been violated. The copy of the list the inspector provided me showed that Jon Howard had called car dealerships from San Rafael to Walnut Creek; a yacht broker in Sausalito; aircraft dealers near SFO and Oakland Airport. The numbers for the real-estate agency and art gallery appeared frequently, as did those of contractor, decorator, and landscaper. Restaurants, theater-ticket agencies, beauty

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shops, and a tanning salon figured prominently. There were no calls to Marnie Morrison's parents, or to anyone who might have been a personal friend.

By now I realized that Jon Howard had covered his tracks very well. I had no photograph of him, no description beyond the one Marnie provided, and that was highly romanticized at best. I didn't even know if he had used his real name. I made my way down the list of places he'd called, though, visiting the yacht broker ("He didn't know shit about boats."), the aircraft sales agencies ("I told him he'd better take flying lessons first, but he just laughed and said he had a pilot on call."), and all the auto dealerships—including Ben Rudolph Chevrolet in Walnut Creek where Howard had called nearly every day but no one had any recollection of either him or Marnie. Finally I reached Lou Petrocelli, driver for Golden West Limousine Service.

"Sure, I got to know him pretty well, driving him around for almost three weeks," Petrocelli told me. "He was . . . well, downhome, like a lot of the rock stars I've driven. When she came along he'd get in back with her and they'd hit the bar, watch some TV. When he was alone he'd hop up front and talk my ear off. Money, it was always money. Was this house in Pacific Heights a good investment? Did I think they oughta buy a van for the help to use for running errands? Which restaurants did the 'in' people eat at? Should he get season tickets for the opera? I thought it was funny, a guy who was supposed to be so rich and smart asking *me* for advice. He struck me as very insecure. But hell, I liked the guy. He was kind of wide-eyed and innocent in his way, and American Express was honoring the charges."

I asked Petrocelli to look over the list of establishments to which Howard had made phone calls. He confirmed he'd driven the couple to most of them, with the exception of the yacht brokers and the car dealership in Walnut Creek. They had traveled as far afield as the Napa Valley for wine tasting, and Marnie had insisted he share their hotel-catered picnic lunch. No, they'd never met with friends; Petrocelli didn't think they'd known anyone in the city except the merchants with whom they had dealings.

Around the time I reached the bottom of the list, other cases began to claim my attention. I'd been ensconced long enough in the cubbyhole under the stairs that All Souls's attorneys believed I was there to stay and began heaping my desk with tasks. They

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ranged from filing documents with the recorder's office to serving subpoenas to interviewing a member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe about an accident he'd witnessed—no simple matter, since his replies to my questions were in pantomime. I made some effort on the Morrison case when I could, but Marnie had stopped calling for reports. The last time I spoke with her she sounded so demoralized that three days later I stopped in at her hotel to see how she was doing; her room was empty, and the manager told me she'd checked out. Checked out in the company of a handsome young man driving an old Honda.

Jon Howard?

When I reported this latest development to Hank, he didn't seem surprised. "I had a call earlier," he said. "Some guy looking for Marnie. I was with a client, so Ted gave him her number."

"Then it probably was Howard. But how'd he know to call you?"

Hank shrugged. "You've been asking around about him, leaving your card. He could've talked to the limo driver, the real-estate broker—anybody."

"And of course she went away with him."

"She said she still loved him."

"I wonder if he plans to pull the same scam in some other city."

"Doubtful; he doesn't have her American Express card to bankroll it."

"What d'you suppose will happen to her?"

Hank shook his head. "Let's hope her dreams come true—whatever they might be."

A year later I added a follow-up note to the Marnie Morrison file: Her parents, whom Hank had contacted following her disappearance, reported that they'd begun receiving periodic money orders for a hundred dollars apiece, mailed from various Bay Area cities. They were convinced they came from Marnie, in repayment of the credit-card charges. Since they'd long before paid the bill, they wanted to give Hank a message to pass on to their daughter, should she contact him.

The message was that they loved her, she was forgiven and always welcome at home. Hank never was able to tell her.

A couple of years after that I appended a newspaper clipping to the file: The Morrisons had been killed in a fire that swept the southern California canyon where their home was located. The article rehashed the bizarre scam their daughter and her

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boyfriend had perpetrated and mentioned the money orders. A further odd footnote to the story ran awhile later: The money orders were now arriving at the office of the executor of the Morrisons' estate, earmarked "for my parents' favorite charity."

When I saw this last item, I was intrigued and wished I could take the time to locate Marnie. But in those early days at All Souls my caseload was heavy, and soon I was caught up in other equally intriguing matters. The Morrison case still nagged at me, though; it was my first—and last—open file.

My years at All Souls slipped by with a speed that amazed me—when I had time to think about it. On the whole, they were good years.

I closed casefiles both large and small, and even got my picture in the papers. I made lifetime friends: Anne-Marie Altman, who later would become Hank's wife; Ted Smalley, who rose from part-time secretary to operations manager; Rae Kelleher, whom I hired as my assistant when the co-op finally became solvent. Along with a fluctuating cast of partners and staff members, we organized parties and potlucks and poker games, or just sat at the big round table in the kitchen sharing triumphs and sorrows.

My personal life changed: I went from a tiny Mission district studio apartment to my very own house. I fell in and out of love, and each man turned out to be more significant than the previous. I lost one cherished cat but acquired two others. And I fell in love with flying and became a pilot.

But there were also bad times. I was forced to shoot two men, almost killed a third, and had to learn to live with the memories. It put a distance between myself and some of my colleagues—one that could never be bridged. The situations and people I encountered turned me cynical and much less willing to accept anything at face value. And I became increasingly concerned about the violent tendencies I'd discovered within myself. But by then I'd met a man who understood, because he'd been there and felt the same impulses. He sustained me through the more difficult times, does to this day.

When the All Souls partners tried to rein me in to a desk job, I knew it was the beginning of the end. I established my own agency while retaining my offices in the big Bernal Heights

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Victorian, but the co-op soon plunged into a spiral of acrimony and dissension, and I realized it was time to move on. Happily, Hank and Anne-Marie decided to establish their own law firm and join me at my new location on a renovated waterfront pier, and we were able to take Ted and Rae along too.

The All Souls years were at an end. But not before I took a final look at my last open file. . . .

File Closed

The movers had come for my office furniture. All that remained was for me to haul a few cartons to McCone Investigations' nearly new van. I hefted one and carried it down to the foyer of All Souls' big Victorian, then made three round trips for the others. Before I went downstairs for the last time I let my gaze wander around the front room that for years had been my home away from home. Empty, it looked battle-scarred and shabby: The wallpaper was peeling; the ceiling paint had blistered; the hardwood floors were scraped; there were gouges in the mantel of the non-working fireplace.

A far cry from the new offices on the waterfront, I thought, but still I'd miss this room. Would miss sitting in my swivel chair in the window bay and contemplating the sagging rooflines of the Outer Mission district or the weedy triangular park below. Would miss pacing the faded Oriental carpet while talking on the phone. But most of all I would miss the familiar day-to-day sounds of the co-op that had assured me that I was among friends.

Only in the end friends here had been damned few. Now none were left. Time to say goodbye. Time to move on to McCone Investigations' new offices on one of the piers off the Embarcadero, next to the equally new offices of Altman & Zahn, Attorneys-at-Law.

I took the last carton downstairs.

Ted's old desk still stood in the foyer, but without his personal possessions—particularly the coffee mug shaped like Gertrude Stein's head and the campy lamp fashioned from a mesh-stockinged mannequin's leg—it was a slate wiped clean of the years he'd presided there. Already he'd be arranging those treasures down at the pier. I set the box with the others and, both out of curiosity and nostalgia, went along the hall to the converted closet under the stairs that had been my first office.

Rae Kelleher, its recent occupant, had already taken her belongings to McCone Investigations. With relief I saw she'd left the

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ratty old armchair. For a moment I stood in the door looking at each familiar crack in the walls; then I stepped inside and ran my hand over the chair's back where stuffing sprouted. How many hours had I sat there, honing my fledgling investigator's skills?

A cardboard box tucked under the angle of the staircase caught my eye. I peered at it, wondering why Rae had left it behind, and saw lettering in her hand: "McCone Files." Early ones, they must be. I'd probably neglected to remove them from the cabinet when I transferred my things upstairs. I pulled the box toward me, sat down in the armchair, and lifted the lid. A dry, dusty odor wafted up. On the files' tabs I saw names: Albritton, DiCesare, Kaufmann, Morrison, Smith, Snelling, Whelan, and many more. Some I recognized immediately, others were only vaguely familiar, and about the rest I hadn't a clue. I scanned them, remembering—

Morrison! That damned case! It was the only file I hadn't been able to close in all my years at All Souls.

I pulled it from the box and flipped through. Interesting case. Marnie Morrison, the naive young woman with Daddy's American Express card. Jon Howard, the "financier" who had used her to help him scam half the merchants in San Francisco. And Hank in turn had used the case's promise to lure me into taking the job here.

But I hadn't been able to solve it.

Could I solve it now?

Well, maybe. I was a far better investigator than when I'd operated out of this tiny office. The hundreds of hours spent honing my skills had paid off; so had my life experiences, good and bad. I picked up on facts that I might not have noticed back then, could interpret them more easily, had learned to trust my gut-level instincts, no matter how far-fetched they might seem.

I turned my attention to the file.

Well, *there* was one thing right off—the daily phone calls to the car dealership in Walnut Creek. When I'd driven out there and talked with its manager, neither he nor his salesmen could remember the memorable young couple.

I took a pen from my purse, made a note of the dealership's name, address, and phone number, then read on.

And *there* was something else—the conversation I'd had with the salesman at European Motors here in the city. My recent experience with buying a "preowned" van for the agency put a new light on his comments.

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My office phone had been disconnected the day before, and the remaining partners would frown on me placing toll calls on All Souls' line. Quickly I hauled the file box out to where my other cartons sat, threw on my jacket, and headed downhill to the Remedy Lounge on Mission Street.

The Remedy had long been a favorite watering hole for the old-timers at All Souls. Brian, the owner, extended us all sorts of courtesies—excluding table service for anyone but Rae, who reminded him of his dead sister, and including running tabs and letting us use his office phone. When I got there the place was empty and the big Irishman was watching his favorite soap opera on the TV mounted above the bar.

"Sure," he said in answer to my request, "use the phone all you want. Yours is turned off already?"

"Right. It's moving day."

Brian's fleshy face grew melancholy. He picked up a rag and began wiping down the already polished surface of the bar. "Guess I won't be seeing much of you guys anymore."

"Why not? The bar's on a direct line between the new offices and the Safeway where we all shop."

He shrugged. "People always say stuff like that, but in the end they drift away."

"We'll prove you wrong," I told him, even though I suspected he was right.

"We'll see." He pressed the button that unlocked the door to his office.

At his desk I opened my notebook and dialed the number of Ben Rudolph Chevrolet in Walnut Creek. I reached their used-car department. The salesman's answer to my first question confirmed what I already suspected. His supervisor, who had worked there since the late seventies, was out to lunch, he told me, but would be back around two.

Five minutes later I was in the van and on my way to the East Bay.

Walnut Creek is a suburb of San Francisco, but a city in its own right, sprawling in a broad valley in the shadow of Mount Diablo. When I'd traveled there on the Morrison case more than a decade earlier, it still had a small-town flavor: few trendy shops and restaurants in the downtown district; only one office building over two stories; tracts and shopping centers, yes, but also semi-rural

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neighborhoods where the residents still kept horses and chickens. Now it was a hub of commerce, with tall buildings whose tinted and smoked glass glowed in the afternoon sun. There was a new cultural center, a restaurant on nearly every corner, and the tracts went on forever.

Ben Rudolph Chevrolet occupied the same location on North Main Street, although its neighbors squeezed more tightly against it. As I parked in the customer lot I wondered why years ago I had neglected to call the phone number on the list the SFPD had supplied me. If I'd phoned ahead rather than just driven out here, I'd have discovered that the dealership maintained separate lines for its new- and used-car departments. And I'd have known that Jon Howard's daily calls weren't made because he was hot on the trail of a snappy new Corvette.

I went directly to the manager of the used-car department, a ruddy-faced, prosperous-looking man named Dave Swenson. Yes, he confirmed, he'd worked there since seventy-eight. "Only way to survive in this business is you stick with one dealership, dig in, create your own clientele."

"I'm looking for someone who might've been a salesman here in the late seventies and early eighties." I showed him my ID. "Handsome man, dark hair and moustache, late twenties. Good build, below average height. His name may have been Jon Howard."

"No, it wasn't."

"I'm sorry?"

"I know the fella you're talking about, but you got it backwards. His name was Howard John."

Howard John—simple transposition. The salesman at European Motors had told me he knew enough about used cars to sell them, and he'd been correct. "John's not working here anymore?"

"Hell, no. He was fired over a dozen years ago. I don't recall exactly when." Swenson tapped his temple. "Sorry, the old memory's going."

"But you remembered him right off."

"Well, he was that kind of guy. A real screw-up, always talking big and never doing anything about it, but you couldn't help liking him."

"Talking big, how?"

"Ah, the usual. He was studying nights, gonna get his MBA, set up some financial company, be somebody. He'd have a big house

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in the city, a limo, boats and planes, hobnob with all the right people—you know. All smoke and no fire, Howie was, but you had to hand it to him, he could be an entertaining fellow."

"And then he was fired."

"Yeah. It was stupid, it didn't have to happen. The guy was producing; he made sales when nobody else could. What Howie did, he took a vacation to Mammoth to ski. When his week was up, he started calling in, saying he was sick with some bug he caught down there. This went on for weeks, and the boss got suspicious, so he checked out Howie's apartment. The manager said he hadn't been back since he drove off with his ski gear the month before. So a few days after that, when Howie strolled in here all innocent and business-as-usual, the boss had no choice but to can him."

"What happened to him? Do you know where he's working now?"

Swenson stared thoughtfully at me. "You know, I meant it when I said I liked the guy."

"I don't mean him any harm, Mr. Swenson."

"No?" He waited.

Quickly I considered several stories, rejected all of them, and told Swenson the truth. He reacted with glee, laughing loudly and slapping his hand on his desk. "Good for Howie! At least he got a few weeks of the good life before everything went down the sewer."

"So will you tell me where I can find him?"

"I still don't know why you want him."

I hesitated, unsure myself as to why I did. No one was looking for Howard John anymore, and the organization that had assigned me to locate him had ceased to exist. Finally I said, "When you have a sale pending that you think is a sure thing and then it falls through, does it nag at you afterwards?"

"Sure, for years, sometimes. I wonder what I did wrong, why it didn't fly."

"I'm the same way about my cases. This is my last open file from the law firm where I used to work. Closing it will tie off the loose ends."

"Well . . ." Swenson considered some more. "Okay. I don't know if Howie's still there, but I saw him working another lot about three months ago—Roy's Motors, up in Concord."

Concord was a city to the north. I thanked Swenson and hurried out to the van.

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Concord, like Walnut Creek, had developed into a metropolis since I once worked a case at its performing arts pavilion, but the windswept frontage road where Roy's Motors was located was a throwback to the early sixties. An ageing shopping center with a geodesic dome-type cinema and dozens of mostly dead stores adjoined the used-car lot; both were almost devoid of customers. Faded plastic flags fluttered limply above Roy's stock, which consisted mainly of vehicles that looked as though they'd welcome a trip to the auto dismantler's; a sign proclaiming it Home of the Best Deals in Town creaked disconsolately. I could make out the figure of a man sitting inside the small sales shack, but his features were obscured by the dirty window glass.

A young couple were wandering through the lot, stopping here and there to examine pickup trucks. After a few minutes they displayed more than passing interest in a canary-yellow Ford, and the man got up and came out of the shack. He was on the short side and running to paunch, with thinning dark hair, a brushy moustache, and a face that once had been handsome. Howard John?

As he approached the couple, the salesman held himself more erect and sucked in his stomach; his step took on a jaunty rhythm and a charismatic smile lit up his face. He shook hands with the couple, began expounding on the truck. He laughed; they laughed. He helped the woman into the cab, urged the man in on the driver's side. The chemistry was working, the magic flowing. This, I was sure, was the man who years before had scammed the greedy merchants of San Francisco.

A few short weeks of living like the high rollers, I thought, then dismissal from a good job and a series of steps down to this. How did he go on, with the memory of those weeks ever in the back of his mind? How did he come to this windswept lot every day and put himself through the paces?

Well, maybe his dreams—improbable as they might seem—had survived intact. He'd done it once, his reasoning might go, and he could do it again. Maybe Howard John still believed that he was only occupying a way station on the road to the top. But what about Marnie Morrison?

I found Howard John's residence by a method whose simplicity and effectiveness have never ceased to amaze me: a look-see into

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the phone book. The listing was in two names, and the wife's was Marnie.

The shabby residential street was not far from the used-car lot: a two-block row of identical shoebox-style tract homes of the same vintage as the shopping center. The pavement was potholed and the houses on the west side backed up on a concrete viaduct, but big poplars arched over the street and, in spite of the hum of nearby freeway traffic, it had an aura of tranquillity. The house I was looking for was painted mint green and surrounded by a low chain-link fence. A sign on its gate said Sunnyside Daycare Center, and in the yard beyond it sat an assortment of brightly colored playground equipment.

It was close to five o'clock; for the next hour I watched a steady stream of parents arrive and depart with their offspring. Ten minutes after the last had left, a woman came out of the house and began collecting the playthings strewn in the yard. I peered through my shade-dappled windshield and recognized an older, heavier version of Marnie Morrison. Clad in an oversized sweatshirt and leggings that strained over her ample thighs, she moved slowly, stopping now and then to wipe sweat from her brow. When she finished she trudged inside.

So this was what Marnie had become since I'd last seen her: the overworked, prematurely aged wife of an unsuccessful used-car salesman, who operated a daycare center to make ends meet. And one of those ends was her periodic hundred-dollar atonement for the credit-card binge that had bought her a few weeks of high living and dreams.

Unsure as to why I was doing it, I continued to watch the mint green house. I'd found Marnie. Why didn't I give up and go back to the city? There were things I should be doing at the new offices, things I should be doing at home.

But I wanted an end to the story, so I stayed where I was.

Half an hour later a Ford Bronco passed me and pulled into the Johns' driveway. Howard got out carrying a bouquet of pink carnations. He let himself into the yard, stopping to pick up a stuffed bear that Marnie had missed. He held the bear at arm's length, gave it a jaunty grin, and tucked it under his arm. His step was light as he moved toward the door. Before he got it open his wife appeared, now dressed in a gauzy caftan, and enveloped him in a welcoming embrace.

I'd reached the end of the tale. Leaving Marnie and Howard to

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their surviving dreams and illusions, I drove back to All Souls for the last time.

The big Victorian was mostly dark and totally silent. Only the porch light and another far back in the kitchen shone. It was after eight o'clock; none of the remaining partners lived in the building, and they rarely spent more time there than was necessary. The new corporation they'd formed had the property up for sale and would move downtown as soon as a buyer was found.

Moving on, all of us.

I was about to haul the cartons I'd left in the foyer down to the van when I heard a sound in the kitchen—the familiar creak of the refrigerator door. Curiosity aroused, I went back there, walking softly. The room was dim, the light coming from a single bulb in the sconce over the sink. A figure turned from the fridge, glass of wine in hand. Hank.

He started, nearly dropping the glass. "Jesus, Shar!"

"Sorry. I'm not up to talking to any of the new guard tonight, so I tiptoed. Why aren't you down at the pier helping everybody shove the new furniture around?"

"I was, but nobody could make up their mind where it should go, and I foresaw a long and unpleasant relationship with a chiropractor in my future."

"So you came *here?*"

He shrugged. "Why not? You want some wine?"

"Sure. For old times' sake."

Hank went to the fridge and poured the last of the so-so jug variety that had been an All Souls staple. He handed it to me and motioned for me to sit at the round table by the window. As we took our places I realized that they were identical to those we'd occupied the first afternoon I'd come here.

I said, "You still haven't told me why you're here."

"You haven't told me why *you're* here."

"I meant to be gone hours ago, but wait till you hear my news!"

I explained about closing the Morrison file.

He shook his head. "You *do* believe in tying up loose ends. So what about those two—do you think they're happy?"

I hesitated. "What's happy? It's all relative. The guy still brings her flowers. She still dresses up for him. Maybe that's enough."

"But after the scams they pulled, the style they lived in?"

"It only lasted a few weeks. Maybe that was enough, too."

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"Maybe." He took a long pull at his wine, took a longer look around the kitchen. His expression grew melancholy. This room and this table had been at the core of Hank's life since leaving law school.

"Don't," I said, "or you'll get me going."

His eyes moved to the window, scanning the lights of downtown. After a moment they rested and his lips curved into a smile. I knew he was looking at the section of the waterfront where the law firm of Altman & Zahn had recently rented offices next to McCone Investigations on a renovated pier.

"File closed," he said.

We finished our wine in silence. Around us the big house creaked and groaned, as it did every evening when the day's warmth faded. I felt my eyes sting, blinked hard. Only an incurable romantic would find significance in tonight's particular creaks and groans. And I, of course, had not a romantic bone in my body.

So why had that last creak sounded like "goodbye"?

Hank drained his glass and stood. Carried both to the sink, where he rinsed them carefully and set them on the drainboard. "In answer to your earlier question," he said, "I'm here because I forgot something."

"Oh? What?"

He came over and rapped his knuckles on the table where we'd eaten and drunk, played games and talked, celebrated and commiserated, fought and made up, and—now—let go. "This table and chairs're mine. Marin County Flea Market, the week after we founded All Souls. They're going along."

"To our joint conference room?"

"Mind reader. Is that okay with you?"

I nodded.

"Then give me a hand with them, will you?"

I stood, grinning. "Sure, but only if . . ."

"If what?" It was a stupid, sentimental decision—and one I was sure to regret.

"Only if you'll give me a hand with that ratty armchair in my former office. I can't imagine why Rae forgot it." ●

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Never a Cross Word

by Peter Lovesey

Poison, perhaps.

Quick-acting, if you choose the right sort. No mess. Simple to administer.

The problem with a poisoning is that science has progressed so far that you can't expect to get away with it anymore. The police bring in people who make a whole career out of finding symptoms and traces.

Poison is not practical anymore.

"I'm putting on the cocoa, blossom," Rose calls from the kitchen. "Did you switch on the blanket?"

"Twenty minutes ago, my love," answers Albert, easing his old body out of the armchair.

"And I thought you were daydreaming. I ought to know better. My faithful Albert wouldn't forget after all these years. Is my kettle filled?"

He puts his head around the door. "Yes, dear."

"And the hottie—is it emptied from last night?"

"Emptied, yes, and waiting by the bed."

"You're a treasure, Albert."

"I do my best, sweetpea."

"I sometimes wonder how I ever got through the night before we bought the electric blanket. I've always felt the cold, you know. It isn't just old age."

"We had ways of keeping warm," says Albert.

"You've always had a marvellous circulation," says Rose for

Peter Lovesey wrote exclusively historical mystery novels for twenty years before creating contemporary police detective Peter Diamond (see *Bloodhounds*, Mysterious Press 12/96). Diamond's debut (in 1991) was made possible in part, Mr. Lovesey tells us, by his encouraging experiments with short stories with modern settings for *EQMM*. As you will see, his short stories too are gems. ✝

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the millionth time. "You don't know how lucky you are."

Perhaps suffocation is the way. The pillow held firmly over the face. No traces of poison then. How do they know it isn't a heart attack? Mental note: Visit the library tomorrow and find out more about suffocation.

"Nearly ready, honeybunch," says Rose, in the kitchen stirring the milk in the saucepan. "We're a comical pair, when you think about it: I make the cocoa to send us to sleep. You make the tea that wakes us up."

And wash up your sodding saucepan. And the spoon that you always leave by the gas-ring, coated in cocoa. And wipe the surface clean.

"I couldn't bear to get out of bed as early as you do," says Rose. "My dear old Mum used to say . . ."

Six hours sleep for a man, seven for a woman, and eight for a fool.

". . . six hours sleep for a man, seven for a woman, and eight for a fool. I don't know how true it is. Sometimes I feel as if I could stay in bed forever."

"It's coming to the boil, love."

"So it is, my pet. Where are the mugs?"

Albert fetches them from the cupboard and Rose spoons in some cocoa, pours in the steaming milk, and stirs. She gives Albert a sweet smile. "And now it's up the stairs to Bedfordshire."

"I'll check everything first," he says.

"Lights?"

"Yes."

"Doors?"

"Of course, my darling."

"See you presently, then."

"Careful how you go with those mugs, then."

A fall downstairs? Probably fatal at this age. Maybe that's the answer—the loose stair-rod near the top. Not entirely reliable, more's the pity.

In bed, sipping her cocoa, Rose says, "Nice and cosy. Pity it can't stay on all night."

"The electric blanket? Dangerous," says Albert. "They don't recommend it."

"Never mind. I've got my hottie and my kettle ready."

"That's right."

The hot-water bottle and the electric kettle are on Rose's bedside table, ready for the moment, about two in the morning, when

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her feet get cold. She will then switch on the light above her head, flick the switch on the kettle, and wait for it to heat up. Some nights Albert doesn't notice the light and the kettle being switched on, but he unfailingly hears the slow crescendo of the kettle coming to the boil. Then Rose will fill the hot-water bottle and say, "Have I disturbed you, dear? It's only me filling my hottie."

Depressed, Albert stares at the wrinkled skin on the surface of his cocoa. Separate bedrooms might have been the answer, but he's never suggested it. Rose regards the sharing of the bed as the proof of a successful marriage. "We've never spent a single night apart, except for the time I was in hospital. Not a single night. I look at other couples and I know, I just know, that they don't sleep in the same bed anymore." So the guest bedroom is only ever used by guests—her sister from Somerset once a year when the Chelsea Flower Show is on and, once, his friend Harry from army days.

Rose says, "Did you notice the Barnetts this afternoon? Am I mistaken, or were they being just a bit crotchety with each other?"

A night in the guest room would be bliss. Uninterrupted sleep. Just to be spared the inevitable "Have I disturbed you, dear?" at two in the morning.

"Albert, dear."

"Mm?"

"I don't think you were listening. I was asking if you noticed anything about John and Marcia this afternoon."

"John and Marcia?"

"The Barnetts. At bridge."

"Something wrong with their game?"

"No. I'm talking about the way they behaved towards each other. It may have been just my imagination, but I thought Marcia was more prickly with him than usual—as if they'd had words before we arrived. Didn't you notice it?"

"Not that I can recall," says Albert.

"When he had to redeal because of the card that turned faceup?"

"Really?"

"And when he reached for the chocolate biscuit. She was really sharp with him then, lecturing him about his calories. He looked so silly with his hand stuck in the air over the plate of biscuits. You *must* remember that."

"The chocolate biscuit. I do."

"Unnecessary, I thought."

"True."

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"Humiliating the poor man."

"Yes."

"I mean, it isn't as if John is grossly enormous. He's got a bit of a paunch, but he's over seventy, for pity's sake. You expect a man to have a paunch by then."

"Goes without saying," says Albert, who actually has no paunch at all.

Rose drains the last of her cocoa. "You know what would do those two a power of good?"

"What's that?"

"If they spent some time apart from each other. Since he's retired, she sees him all day long. They're not adjusted to it."

"What would he do on his own?"

"I don't know. What do men do with themselves? Golf, or bowls. Fishing."

"When I go fishing, you always come with me and sit on the riverbank talking."

"That's different, isn't it? We're inseparable. We don't need to get away from each other. We haven't the slightest desire to be alone."

There is an interval of silence.

Rose resumes. "They won't catch you and me saying unkind things to each other in public, will they?"

"Or in private," says Albert.

She turns and smiles. "You're right, my love. Never a cross word in forty-seven years."

"Forty-eight."

Rose frowns. "No dear, forty-seven. This is nineteen ninety-six. We were married in nineteen forty-nine. The difference is forty-seven."

"Yes, but we met in nineteen forty-eight."

"I wasn't counting that," Rose says.

"It's another year."

"Of course, looked at like that . . ."

"No arguments when we were courting. Lovers' tiffs, they would have been."

"But there weren't any. Ah well." She puts her mug on the bedside table and switches out the light on her side. "It's far too late for mental arithmetic. Time to get my beauty sleep. Nighty-night, darling." She turns for the good-night kiss. They've never gone to sleep without the goodnight kiss in forty-seven years, or is it forty-eight?

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Their lips meet briefly.

"Sweet dreams."

Albert gets rid of his mug and reaches for the light switch. He yawns, wriggles down, and turns away from her, wondering what time the library opens.

He's in an aircraft about to take off for Australia. Off for a long holiday, time to adjust, to get over the grief, he has been telling everyone. The engines of the jumbo are roaring, louder by the second, building to the immense power needed for takeoff.

A voice says, "Have I disturbed you, dear?"

"What?"

"It's only me filling my hottie."

He emerges from the dream and looks at the clock. Five past two.

"I couldn't survive without my hottie," Rose says. "I don't know how you manage, really I don't."

"Marvellous circulation," Albert says silently, moving his lips unseen.

Rose says, "It must be your marvellous circulation. Well, there it is: a nice hot bottle for my poor cold feet. Now I'll be off to sleep again in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

Forty minutes later, Albert is still awake, thinking about ways of faking a suicide.

He is up as usual on the dot of six, groping for his slippers. He feels as if he could sleep three more hours, given the opportunity, but the habit of rising at six is too deeply rooted ever to change. He knows he'll feel better after the first cup of tea.

He edges around the bed to her side and unplugs the electric kettle.

Picking it up, he shuffles towards the bathroom.

Down in the kitchen, he cleans the saucepan and the spoon from the night before and wipes the surface clean. The kettle boils.

The tea is a lifesaver.

In the library, while Rose is looking at the Romance section, Albert covertly inspects a volume entitled *Essentials of Forensic Medicine*. The chapter on suffocation and asphyxia runs to several pages. The list of post-mortem appearances, external and internal, is so daunting that he abandons the whole idea. But another chapter, Electrocution, catches his eye and captures his imagination.

"Do you want to borrow it?"

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He snaps the book shut and looks to his right. Rose is at his side. He pushes it back into the first space he can see and says, "No, I was just browsing really."

"This is the medical section, isn't it?"

"Yes, I was only whiling away the time, checking up on my rheumatism. Have you picked yours, my love?"

"I'm going to borrow three, just in case I find I've read one of them before."

"Good thinking."

That afternoon, when Rose is deep in her romantic novel, Albert tries to slip away unnoticed to the bedroom.

"Where are you off to, honeybunch?"

"I think some air must have got into one of the radiators. I'd like to check."

Rose says admiringly, "My handyman."

"I shouldn't be more than twenty minutes."

"I think I *may* have read this. I'm not sure."

"If you have, you could always try one of the others."

He goes upstairs, straight to the bed, and lifts up the undersheet on Rose's side. The electric blanket lies there, the single size, only on her side—because his marvellous circulation keeps him warm without artificial help. This blanket has been doing its job for at least ten years and has lost most of its original colour. The fabric at the edges is getting frayed, and where her feet go, it has worn thin. He stares at it thoughtfully. He looks at the flex leading to the twin point where it is kept plugged in.

"Will it take long, dear?" Rose calls up. She must be standing at the foot of the stairs.

Hastily Albert tugs the undersheet over the electric blanket again.

"Not long, my dear," he answers; adding in a whisper, "It should be very quick."

"Shall I put the kettle on? I wouldn't mind a cup."

"Good idea."

A few precious minutes. He folds the sheet back again, takes a penknife from his pocket, opens it, and begins scraping at the thin covering where her feet go. Cutting would be too obvious. It must look as if it has worn away naturally. He scrapes at several places and finally the threads begin to part and the copper element beneath is laid bare. He continues to work, exposing more of it, until he gets the call that the tea is ready downstairs. He scoops the loose threads into his hand, pockets the

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penknife, and straightens the undersheet and tucks it in.

"Is that job done, my love?" Rose calls up.

"I hope so, my dear," answers Albert, planning the next part of the operation. It can wait until the evening.

"Have some tea, then. You deserve it."

About nine-thirty, after watching the news on television, he gets up as usual to take the kettle upstairs and switch on the electric blanket. Rose remains in her chair, knitting. Albert has done this so many times that he doesn't even have to tell her where he is going.

He collects the kettle, fills it with water in the kitchen, and carries it upstairs, placing it on Rose's bedside table. He switches on the electric blanket.

The hot-water bottle is in the bathroom as usual, and has to be emptied. He unscrews it and stands it upside down in the wash basin to drain. Then he gets to work on the stopper. He pulls the rubber washer away from the base. This should ensure that the bottle leaks. To be quite certain, he makes a test, half filling it, screwing in the stopper, and holding it upside down. Sure enough, it drips steadily.

The preparations completed, he goes downstairs and joins Rose for the last hour before retiring.

When the milk is simmering in the saucepan, Rose asks, "Did you remember to switch on the blanket, Albert darling?"

"An hour ago, my love."

"So thoughtful."

"I think the milk—"

"Quick! The mugs."

Rose lifts the saucepan from the hob. Albert places the mugs beside the cocoa tin and Rose does the rest.

Everything is in place, as the politicians like to say. There is little else for Albert to do. At two in the morning, he will be wakened as usual while Rose fills the hot-water bottle. She will push it down by her cold feet. In two shakes of a lamb's tail, as she will tell him, she will be asleep. For the next hour it will seep, seep over the undersheet, slowly saturating the electric blanket. While it remains warm, she won't notice. And when he judges the moment right, Albert will get out of bed, move around in the dark, and switch on the blanket.

An unfortunate accident, they will decide at the inquest. Faulty equipment.

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"Is it up the stairs to Bedfordshire?" says Rose.

"I think it is, dear."

"Will you lock the doors and turn out the lights?"

"Depend upon it," says Albert.

In bed, they drink their last cup of cocoa together, sitting up.

"People are so stupid," says Rose.

"What do you mean, dear?" says Albert.

"When you hear about so many marriages breaking up. So much unhappiness. If they'd only have a little more consideration for each other."

"True," says Albert.

You bloody old hypocrite, thinks Rose. Driving me to the brink of insanity with your sanctimonious smile and your "Yes, my darling," while you pursue your own selfish ways, waking me every blasted morning at six. Heaving yourself up with a groan and a yawn, to put on your slippers, regardless that it all causes a minor earthquake in the bed. Groping around the edge of the mattress to collect the damned kettle. Switching on the bathroom light. Flushing the toilet. Clumping downstairs and turning on the radio. Forty-seven years of it, I've endured. His farting, his fishing, and his football on television.

And never a cross word between us. I wouldn't give you that satisfaction. I've held out all this time.

"Oh dear."

"What's the matter, love?" says Albert.

"I've forgotten to go to the bathroom—and just when I was getting nice and cosy." She sighs. "I suppose I shall have to get out."

"That's one thing I can't do for you," says Albert.

"Snuggle down, dear. I shan't be long."

From the bathroom Rose collects a chair and takes it to the landing, stands on it, and removes the bulb from the landing light. She returns the chair to the bathroom and collects the length of Albert's fishing twine she has earlier concealed under the mat. She takes it to the top of the stairs and attaches it firmly to a nail in the skirting board. Then she ties the other end to one of the banisters to form a tripwire over the top stair. In the dark at six in the morning he will never see it.

Rose returns to bed and gets in.

"Nighty-night, my darling."

"Sleep well, sweetpea."

They exchange the goodnight kiss and turn out their lights. ●

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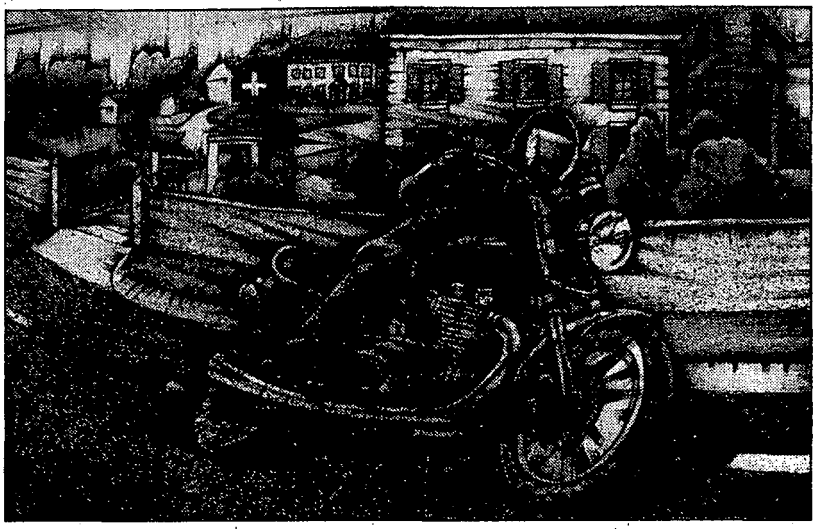

Art by Greg Voth

The Bow of Wrath

by Gerald Tomlinson

Three days a week Joel Graham appeared out of the morning mist, speeding west toward Mifflinburg. Head down, body angled forward over the handlebars of his Kawasaki, black leather jacket wind-whipped in the biting air of late autumn, he looked more like a gonzo street fighter than the acclaimed novelist he was.

Joel Graham: four novels, countless glowing reviews, few sales, no movies. Acclaimed but not prospering. With his royalties touching ground zero three years before, he opted to earn his daily bread by teaching creative writing at Bledsoe College in the small farming community of Mifflinburg.

Having since put in two full years and more of reading overripe sludge and giving it his qualified, halfhearted praise, he wanted out. Living on his love of metaphor and his dreams of immortality, he hoped, on a more mundane level, that his recently published novel, *The Bow of Wrath,* would send his income on an upward arc

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and allow him to bid adieu to fair Bledsoe.

To me he seemed like a winner, despite meager royalties that argued otherwise. Whenever I saw him roaring toward me on Route 32 on that red Kawasaki (and me in my sensible Honda Civic), I thought of him as a creative spirit unbound, a genius for sure, yet close by and accessible.

We had talked three times on line at the supermarket in Brockville, where he lived and where I had just started to teach American history. I was in my first year at the local high school, home of the state-champion Blue Devils football team. A fan of Joel Graham rather than of our school's gridiron heroes, I bought and read *The Bow of Wrath* when it first appeared, considered it brilliant, and, at one of our checkout-line encounters, asked Graham to autograph it for me soon. The Brockville Public Library, curiously enough, but for a reason I soon came to understand, had not ordered the novel. And it was far too raw for the school librarian to touch.

Like the sleuth in his new story, Gerald Tomlinson began his career as a teacher of English and social studies in upstate New York. In 1974 he began writing short stories, which have since appeared not only in *EQMM* and *AHMM*, but in a variety of anthologies, including Edward D. Hoch's series *The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories*. Mr. Tomlinson is currently a freelance writer who also runs his own small publishing company, Home Run Press.

On the last Wednesday in November, as I drove east toward Brockville, I met Joel on his Kawasaki near the outskirts of town. Our timing was a bit off that morning. I was pulling into town early for a conference with an unhappy parent, he was late for a reason never determined, and his red machine kicked up a spray of loose gravel from a patched pothole as he roared by. We usually crossed paths somewhere near the Dinwiddie Oak, a towering four-hundred-year-old landmark that overspread our common two-lane highway about four miles out of Brockville toward Mifflinburg.

Mrs. Jane Roe—that was her real name—wanted to know why

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her oldest son Edward, Brockville High's star halfback, had been piling up straight F's in history since the opening bell in September. I assured her that Eddie could do better, but only if he decided to finish his assignments and turn them in. I rifled his empty portfolio, showed her my grade book. "No work, no credit," I explained. "His touchdowns don't count in American History."

As luck would have it, my first-period class brought Eddie Roe, the Blue Devils' high-spirited but low-achieving halfback, to Room 319, where I held forth on subjects historical. I talked to him for a few moments after class.

"You know, Mr. Davis," he told me, "I'm busy all the time with football practice and stuff. Couldn't you, like, give me some kind of assignment where I could just talk to people instead of going to the library? You know, something about Brockville history, maybe, instead of that dumb stuff about tariffs. My dad's a lawyer, and he knows everything there is to know about Brockville. Skeletons in the closet, if you know what I'm saying. I mean, he knows everybody in town and what they're up to. What do you say?"

As a first-year teacher, I knew I had to follow the curriculum, but I couldn't resist his suggestion. "Eddie, if you want an assignment like that, I'll give you one. Let me think about it."

"Thanks, Mr. Davis," he said. "Anything you want to know about the Kook Capital of America, you got it."

New as I was to Brockville, I knew what he meant. For the past dozen years or so, a growing, well-funded religious cult, "The New Awakening"—TNA for short—had been building a sprawling, fortresslike compound a couple of miles from the center of town. I passed the gleaming white buildings every day. The main gate, flanked by a gatehouse that was manned twenty-four hours a day, faced Route 32 just west of where I'd seen Joel Graham on his motorcycle that morning. The whole compound took up about four hundred acres.

Most of my students held Eddie's cynical view of the cult, but the powers that be in Brockville didn't. Regardless of TNA's militancy (highly esteemed at Rod's Gun Shop on Centre Street) and its brainwashing (reported by nonlocal media only), the congregation, if you could call it that, had pumped enterprise and dollars into Brockville. Few if any residents cared about TNA's ideas, which were formulated by the group's charismatic leader, Obadiah Rogers (a.k.a. Morris "The Penman" Lucas), a middle-aged

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ex-convict (extortion, embezzlement, forgery) who, with his tall, angular frame, penetrating gaze, tangled eyebrows, and lavish gray beard, looked like an Old Testament prophet but acted like a modern robber baron.

My second period was free. I grabbed my lesson-plan notebook and steered for the faculty lounge. On the way I ran into Ron Seidman, a second-year English teacher.

"Hey," he greeted me. "Did you hear? Joel Graham, the author, the guy who wrote *Hrothgar*, just got killed out on Route 32."

That stopped me cold. I took a deep breath. "He what? I saw him less than an hour ago on his way to Bledsoe."

"Well, he never got there. His motorcycle went out of control near TNA headquarters. He was dead by the time the Rescue Squad got to him."

The first thing that went through my head was, "They got him." By "they" I meant The New Awakening.

I went back to my empty classroom to ponder in private. His new novel rested on a shelf back in my apartment, but I knew its substance well enough. Its title, *The Bow of Wrath*, came from a quotation printed on a page near the front of the book. The author of the quotation was the fiery evangelist Jonathan Edwards, a voice from an older and distant awakening—the so-called Great Awakening of the 1730s:

> "The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being drunk with your blood."

Strong words, uttered long ago, although not as long ago as the equally scary words of the Old Testament.

What Joel Graham set out to do in *The Bow of Wrath*—on the surface a highly melodramatic novel—was to skewer The New Awakening, to hold it up to ridicule. "A satirical and electrifying tour de force," the Baltimore *Eagle* called it. And no one who knew the first thing about TNA could miss the author's intention. Graham didn't call his fictional cult The New Awakening but rather The Chosen of Sorreg (perhaps too transparent an anagram of Rogers). Although he put plenty of humor in his prose, I was quite

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sure that the clever touches would be lost on Obadiah Rogers's intense and dedicated band.

What I didn't know was how far the leaders of TNA might go to show their displeasure at Graham's tweaking. They had kept the novel out of the Brockville Public Library. They had kept it out of the local bookstore. They had made sure it got no notice in the Brockville *Daily Express*.

My students didn't talk about the book, even though its setting, described in vivid, nearly photographic detail, stood in full view of everyone, a mere two miles from Brockville High School. Our English department ignored the novel, needing no excuse for their silence given Graham's torrid sex scenes and drunken-jailbird dialogue.

This conspiracy of silence would have to stop short of the countenancing of murder, I assumed. Murder? That's what I thought. Without having seen the accident site, without having talked to the police, without having looked further into the facts behind Graham's explosive fiction, that's what I thought.

That fall afternoon I took my usual route home. No sign of the fatal wreck remained. I drove slowly and watched carefully all the way from the eastern edge of TNA's compound to the magnificent Dinwiddie Oak. This straight stretch of rural highway, fringed by trees in bursts of gold and red, looked idyllic enough to be the subject of a calendar photograph.

When I reached my apartment, I flipped on the TV set. In half an hour or so the local newscaster, a heavyset man with a slight lisp, reported the incident:

"Joel Graham, a professor of English at Bledsoe College in Mifflinburg, was killed early this morning when he lost control of his motorcycle on county highway 217, southwest of Brockville. There were no witnesses. Police speculate that Graham, who had been issued four speeding summonses in the last year, may have been unfamiliar with the narrow, winding road and may have approached a curve at too high a speed. The investigation is continuing."

I stared at the screen in disbelief. After Ron Seidman told me about the fatal crash, he'd driven out toward Mifflinburg on Route 32—not county highway 217. Ron's second period, like mine, was free, and he had wanted to take a look at the death site for himself. Sure enough, although Graham's body had been removed, the twisted Kawasaki remained at the scene. At the very moment Ron

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arrived, it was being dragged from a ditch about two hundred yards west of TNA's gatehouse. Two men from Freeman's service station were loading it onto a truck.

An appropriate, if sad, conclusion to Graham's Brockville sojourn, I suppose, since the sketchily educated Dave Freeman was, for reasons never clear, Joel Graham's best friend in town, if not his only friend. They sometimes had dinner together at the Brockville Diner, where their conversation across the Formica must have concerned motorcycles, not metaphors. Joel often garaged his bike at Freeman's, and Dave did all the maintenance and repair work on it.

I decided to talk to Dave Freeman, which I did the next day after school.

"Never read them books of his," Dave said slyly after I had introduced myself. "Too deep for me. Joel sure worked hard on 'em, though. Nicest guy you'd ever want to meet. Just worked too hard. Always working. I figure he must've fell asleep on his bike out there by TNA."

"No mechanical problems, I suppose?"

Dave looked hurt. "That bike was a jewel, Mr. Davis." He glanced sadly at its remains in the corner of his cluttered lot. "It was in perfect shape. Nothing went wrong with that bike."

"Maybe a curve in the road?"

He snorted. "Ain't no curve in the road. Route 32 out there is straight as an arrow. Flat as an ironing board. Go look."

"Could he have hit a rock or something?"

"Don't see how. You're on a bike, you see rocks, mufflers, road kills, you miss 'em."

"How about a live rabbit? Or a skunk?"

"Naw. Joel knew how to drive. He wouldn't've lost control even if a raccoon jumped out in front of him. Which ain't likely at that time of day."

"Too little sleep," I echoed.

Freeman turned his palms up in a questioning gesture. "What else? He worked too hard. Slept too little. Go figure."

I thanked him for his time, said goodbye, and ambled off to figure. Actually, I didn't have to figure. I went straight to the Brockville Police Department on State Street, where the desk sergeant listened gravely to my inquiry, then broke into a loud guffaw.

"That announcer on WXTX can't get his own name straight. You

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tell him there's been an explosion at the Selco plant, it comes out to be a rape on the courthouse steps. Sure, the professor was killed on Route 32. He lost control of that suicide cart of his on a long, dry straightaway. God knows why. He went flying. Broke his neck, the coroner thinks, but that's not definite yet. You think we're blind and retarded?"

No, I didn't think that at all. Still, the three-column obituary in the New York *Chronicle*, not to mention the various wire-service dispatches, also identified the crash site as a dangerous curve on county highway 217. It made you wonder about the precision of news gathering.

First thing Friday morning I cornered Eddie Roe and said, "I've got an assignment for you."

After class I explained it to him. "Here's the deal. Everybody in town has stories of some kind about The New Awakening, but nobody really knows what goes on out there. Or in there. For instance—" I paused to get the wording right. "Suppose somebody makes Obadiah Rogers hopping mad. Really furious. Full of rage. Maybe this person says something, or writes something, or does something that the messiah, or whoever he thinks he is, just can't swallow. How does TNA deal with the problem?"

Eddie frowned. "You mean if a member of the cult does it? Like, he makes Obadiah real mad?"

"Anybody. Man or woman. Inside or outside the group. Does the TNA leadership have a way to discipline people who cross them?"

Eddie scratched his forehead. "That's all you want to know? That's the assignment?"

"That's the assignment."

A look of happy wonder crossed his face. "That won't be hard. My dad has a client right now who *did* cross them. Or he intends to. He's an ex-TNA member. Says they, like, conned him out of a fortune, and he wants to sue to get it back. He's living out in Missouri now, or Oklahoma, or someplace like that. Where he lives is a secret, I think. But he's one of my dad's clients. He really is."

I took my time before responding. "Okay, Eddie," I said. "I can't ask you or your father for confidential information. Lawyer-client privilege and such. But this is an important matter. It's a serious question, life and death, even. And, believe me, I won't forget you at grading time. If your dad or his client knows anything at all about TNA enforcement, well—that's the assignment."

Eddie seemed to have no qualms. "You got it, Mr. Davis!"

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I had a theory about what might have happened to Joel Graham, so on Sunday, after mass, I drove east on Route 32 to investigate. My first stop was at the TNA gatehouse. A young man, powerfully built and ramrod straight, greeted me.

"Do you have an appointment, sir?"

"No. Could I make one?"

He shook his head. "Not with me. I'm what you call a flunky." He smiled engagingly. "How can I help you?"

"Well," I said. "Could you tell me who was on duty here at the gatehouse when that motorcyclist cracked up on Wednesday?"

The young man stared at me, unblinking. His smile dissolved. "Would you please identify yourself, sir?"

"I'm a teacher at Brockville High School," I said. "It occurred to me that whoever was on duty here may have seen the accident."

He seemed to relax. "No." A tentatively friendly expression returned. "Stan Freyer was on duty. He didn't see a thing. Didn't even know it had happened until a police car and an ambulance came zipping by. He's talked to the police already. Nobody saw the accident. Not Stan, not anybody."

"Stan Freyer. That's F-r-e—"

"I'm sorry, sir. The phone is ringing. I'll have to say goodbye now." He turned away and stood facing the other way until I backed out of the short driveway.

It was possible, I had to admit, that Freyer hadn't seen the crash. The rear wall of the gatehouse effectively blocked the gatekeeper's vision of westbound traffic. But wait. I wasn't looking for an eyewitness exactly. I was looking for a murderer.

I was also looking for a murder weapon. Had the police searched carefully in the tall brown grass near the crash site? Probably they had. After all, this alleged accident must have looked a little suspicious to them. A straight, flat, dry, deserted highway, with no reason whatever for the Kawasaki to spin out—but it did.

Still, could the local police be trusted? Someone had gone so far as to release false information to the press about where the crash occurred. Maybe the investigators had found evidence along the road and suppressed it. Maybe. But what could I do about that?

Nothing, really. I did have all day Sunday to search the tall grass for myself, though. I began tramping over the ground near the highway, looking, probing, not quite sure of the precise spot where Joel had lost control of his bike.

After an hour or so, I found something—a stone—far down the

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road to the east of what I supposed was the crash site. Nestled in the brown grass, it was smoothly rounded, about the size of a billiard ball. Almost perfectly shaped, it looked like no other stones in the neighborhood. It aroused my suspicions, but only mildly. Even if a prospective killer had a throwing arm like Nolan Ryan's, he could hardly have knocked Joel Graham off his motorcycle with it. I kept the stone, having nothing else to show for my efforts.

After two more hours, I packed it in. If there had ever been any convincing evidence of foul play along that highway, it had disappeared by Sunday afternoon.

My hunch was that the evidence hadn't disappeared into a patrol car. More likely, I thought, it had passed from view within minutes of the crash. But what *was* it?

I looked forward to Monday morning, first period. If Eddie Roe had anything to report, he should have it by then.

He did.

Eddie breezed into class as if he had just completed a ninety-yard touchdown run. He smiled and waved. "You got it," he whispered as he passed my desk.

My lesson on "The Tariff of Abominations" aroused little enthusiasm. I struggled to get through it. My best student, a girl with straight golden hair and straight-A's, yawned. Only the Blue Devils' star halfback seemed excited, and I knew it wasn't because of any newfound admiration for Andrew Jackson. He had fresh news. I had only fusty intelligence from the year 1828.

"Well?" I said when the bell rang at last.

Fidgety as he was, Eddie waited until the other students had filed out.

"The assignment—"

I nodded. "Right. The assignment."

"You asked about how TNA deals with people who get out of line."

"Right."

He leaned toward me conspiratorially. "There's a special unit to handle those problems," he said in a low tone. "Very few members know it exists. I mean, it's top secret. But my dad's client learned about it mainly because he brought so much money into the place. They treated him like a big deal. He pretty much found out anything he wanted to about the organization. At first he liked what he saw. Later on, he didn't."

Now I was the fidgety one. "A special unit."

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"They call it the Council of Dan. It's an elite outfit. Only it's more like a death squad."

I racked my memory. It sounded familiar. "The Council of Dan."

"Do you know where the name comes from?"

"Tell me."

Eddie reached into his back pocket and pulled out a sheet of lined notebook paper. "This is for my portfolio," he said. "It's my research. For extra credit, okay?"

"Just tell me."

"It's from the Bible. The Old Testament. Genesis, chapter forty-nine, verse seventeen." He read to me from the paper, his voice distinct, with a hint of pride:

> " 'Dan shall be a serpent by the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse heels, so that his rider shall fall backward.' "

He handed me the paper containing the quotation.

"Fine," I said. "Into your portfolio it goes. And it's an interesting discovery. But I need more."

"I've got more." He pulled a second paper from another pocket. "More portfolio stuff," he said. "More research."

"Yes."

"There are three members of the Council of Dan. My dad's client isn't sure who they are. I mean, he thinks he knows, but he isn't dead certain. Okay?"

"Okay."

"He's fairly sure one of them is Obadiah Rogers. I mean, Rogers is sort of the head of everything. And he's a killer, not just a thief. Or at least he hands down the sentences. I mean, my dad's client says he heard that Rogers ordered a member's wife to be murdered. And somebody killed her, right there on the compound. No one ever even reported it."

I caught my breath but stayed outwardly calm. "Who else is on the council?"

"There's a roving enforcer. He has about a dozen aliases. He's a phantom. They even call him that. My dad thinks he's probably on the trail of his Arkansas or whatever client right now. The guy's real name may be Rodriguez. Or it may not be. Who knows?"

"And the third?"

"The third is the full-time TNA gatekeeper. Stan Freyer. He's an ex-con with a nice personality. He spent, like, two years in prison for armed robbery. He's been tried twice for murder, but he

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charmed the jury into acquitting him both times. I mean, he's a good-looking guy, twenty-something, built like a tank. He acts polite. He'll 'sir' you to death."

"I think I've met him."

"Really?" Eddie looked impressed. "Did you see his crossbow?"

"His *what?*"

"No joke, Mr. Davis. He's got a crossbow he keeps right there in the gatehouse. It's his weapon. They've got all kinds of heavy artillery at the compound, you know. Anything automatic that Arnold Schwarzenegger ever saw. But this happy clown, this muscle-bound Council of Dan crazy, I mean, he uses a crossbow."

I thought about this new information for a moment. "You didn't by any chance research the subject of crossbows for me, did you, Eddie?"

He squinted at me, puzzled. "No. Should I?"

"You could," I said. "It might raise your grade a letter or so." I paused, thinking about my next move. Then I reached into my desk drawer and produced the smooth, rounded stone. "I found this lying in the grass near where the Kawasaki crashed."

Eddie stared at it, nodded doubtfully, and left for his trigonometry class.

Being a history major, I already knew something about crossbows. One of the things I knew was that, in the old days, a crossbow could fire arrows, darts, or stones. I assumed that modern crossbows had at least the same capabilities. If I was right, the rounded stone I'd shown Eddie might be significant after all.

The teachers' lounge offered a corner carrel with a computer, a word-processing program, a dot-matrix printer, and sufficient privacy to spur me to immediate action. I sat down and typed a message:

> Dear Obadiah Rogers—
>
> We all feel a deep, righteous wrath toward Joel Graham and his sinful book. Yet I cannot believe that our Council of Dan would order its author to be stoned to death at our very doorstep. On Wednesday, just after morning prayer, two of us in the Awakening saw Stanley Freyer standing near the gatehouse. We saw him shoot a stone from his crossbow toward the speeding scribbler on his motorcycle. The professor fell from his vehicle, which then crashed into a ditch. I rejoice that we have not revealed to unbelievers the true location of this event. But I submit that Brother Stanley must be disciplined.

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I signed the message "Loyal and Awake," marked the envelope "Confidential," and mailed it that afternoon at the Brockville Post Office.

Next morning Eddie Roe seemed a bit downcast. "My dad doesn't, like, know anything about crossbows," he said. "But my mom's made an appointment for me later this week with the guy who teaches medieval history at Bledsoe College. He's an expert, she says. But she doesn't see what this assignment has to do with American history."

"Fine," I said. "Listen, Eddie, let's wait a week or so before going any further with the assignment. One thing you might do in the meantime, though, is read Joel Graham's novel, *The Bow of Wrath,* which *does* have to do with American history. Mind you, I'm not recommending the book to you—I have to recommend against it—but if you *should* happen to read it, you'll find it rewarding."

"Thanks, Mr. Davis. How's my grade looking so far?"

"Quite good," I promised. "But it could look better."

I dropped the whole matter until the following Monday. By then the Brockville gridders had rolled over Mifflinburg, 48-7, with Eddie Roe scoring three touchdowns for the Blue Devils. In addition to his triumph on the playing field, he had done his assignment—done it more thoroughly than I could have imagined.

"Well, I read the book," Eddie said cheerily at the end of first period. "You're right, it was interesting. Sorreg is Rogers, right? What a creep. And I talked with Dr. Whosis at Bledsoe about crossbows."

"And—"

Eddie grinned. "I think I've solved the mystery. So help me, I do. Can you, like, come out to my car for a minute?"

An odd request, but why not? "Sure," I said. "It's my free period."

We hied out to the students' parking lot, where Eddie's vintage yellow Pontiac stood between a much-dented Corvette and a new Mustang. When he lifted the trunk, I gasped.

There on the floor, in a large, low, open-topped box, lay a mangled crossbow. Also in the box was a smaller box containing five or six smooth, round stones.

"Good lord! Is that Stan Freyer's crossbow?"

"Sure is. What's left of it. Me and a couple of my friends, senior linebackers, went out to the gatehouse on Friday night. Like, after

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dark. My buddies started an argument with the gatekeeper. A fight, sort of. They really insulted him, teed him off, got him to chase them back toward their car. They'd parked it a few hundred feet down the road toward Mifflinburg."

"Stan Freyer chased them?"

"No, no. Not Freyer. This was a new gatekeeper—a fat guy in his thirties named Martinez. They asked for Freyer. But Martinez told them Freyer quit TNA all of a sudden on Wednesday afternoon and left for California. Anyway, while my friends and him were yelling at each other, I sneaked into the gatehouse. It's, like, a mess in there, but after a couple of minutes, I found this box in a corner under a table. I carried it out, ran up the road toward Brockville, and waited. My friends picked me up after they got through hassling Martinez."

I leaned down to examine the wrecked crossbow. As I did, the full answer struck me. But before I could explain it to Eddie, he explained it to me. His research had paid off. He'd put the pieces together.

Eddie said: "Freyer must have, like, stepped out near the road when Joel Graham came racing toward him. He aimed his crossbow and fired one stone—probably that stone in your desk drawer. And he, like, missed. By then he'd been spotted, so he really had to get the job done. Quick. No second shot. Without even thinking, he tossed his crossbow under the front wheel of the motorcycle. Wham! End of ride, end of writer."

Plus end of crossbow, I added to myself. And end of mystery. I reached out and shook Eddie's hand. "It sounds right to me."

A missing-person report on Stan Freyer led to a search warrant, which led to the discovery of a *woman's* body buried in a far corner of the compound. The back of the woman's skull had been punctured by a small-caliber bullet.

TNA never did unlimber all that stashed artillery. And even before the woman's corpse came to light, Obadiah Rogers vanished with a sizable wad of TNA cash. Arrested two days later in San Francisco, he blamed everything on "the Phantom"—the fat new gatekeeper. He said Martinez had murdered both the woman and Stan Freyer. The Phantom, no stand-up guy, admitted to being the shooter, but insisted he'd gotten his whacking orders straight from Rogers.

Stan Freyer's body was unearthed in a shallow grave within the low, iron-grate fence under the Dinwiddie Oak, just where Mar-

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tinez said it would be. According to him, the Council of Dan, by then down to two members, intended to move the woman's body there as well, since they wanted to get her off the compound. But time ran out.

By June, when the school year ended, the case was essentially closed. Obadiah Rogers and Lou Martinez were in jail awaiting trial. Rogers's cult following had quickly drifted away in the wake of the uproar. The four-hundred-acre compound sprouted a "For Sale" sign, but there were no buyers.

I gave Eddie Roe an A in American History.

The school board fired me.

"And they done right to fire that meddler," Dave Freeman told his old customers when they drove up for gas. Freeman still clung to his sleeping-at-the-handlebars theory of Brockville's most famous homicide. Like many other locals, he resented the paroxysm that had suddenly shut down The New Awakening's money machine.

"This town is just plain dead now," Dave grumbled. "Deader'n my old friend Joel Graham." ●

Happy 143rd Birthday, Holmes!

One hundred forty-three years old (according to Sherlockians, who have fixed the date of his birth) and still going strong, Sherlock Holmes can claim a longevity unequaled by any other fictional character. He owes this continuing vitality in part to organizations such as the Baker Street Irregulars, who meet each year to celebrate his birthday on January 6 in New York City. It is our custom to pay homage annually to this select group of Sherlockians on the occasion of their birthday party for Sherlock Holmes. Their organization is the oldest and most prestigious of the many Sherlockian organizations around the world, and they have claimed as members many distinguished persons in the mystery genre, including Fred Dannay, the founder of this magazine. Let us all tip our hats (or deerstalkers—as the case may be) to the Baker Street Irregulars and the immortal Holmes. *For special features devoted to Sherlock Holmes see this month's Jury Box (p. 155) and "Watson's Mournful Reveries" (p. 48).*

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WATSON'S MOURNFUL REVERIES

Harlan L. Umansky

If you were Irene Adler
And I were Sherlock Holmes,
Our passion would be fiery
As a hundred thousand ohms.
The world would glorify our love
In endless epic poems.

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We would honeymoon at Reichenbach
Where the falling water foams;
On Uffa and in far Tibet
We would build vacation homes.
By day we'd tour the countryside
In hansom cabs or broughams;
We would spend our nights in poring
Over ashes, stains, and loams—
If you were Irene Adler
And I were Sherlock Holmes.

We would dauntlessly stroll fogbound streets
Where the footpad slyly roams;
Together we'd solve cryptic crimes;
Our triumphs would fill tomes.
We would shadow super-criminals
Through ghostly catacombs,
Through the opium dens of Limehouse
And through Brighton's pleasure domes—
If you were Irene Adler
And I were Sherlock Holmes.

But alas! You're Mary Morstan
And I am Watson, John or James,
Two ordinary mortals
With ordinary names;
And in spite of all the sorcery
Of wizards, djinns, and gnomes,
You remain no Irene Adler
And I am still no Sherlock Holmes.

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Catherine Blake and the Bandy Children

by Keith Heller

The child whom Saunders Dance found in Naked Boy Alley was not a boy or naked, but he had to turn his eyes away just the same. He had found too many such overlooked innocents littering the alleys of London, and each discovery subtracted a little more hope from his heart. Sometimes, he knew, it was better not to see too much.

He finally examined the poor girl by the light of a link he carried with him through the night streets. She was, like all of them, scrawny and soiled, and now she lay in a defensive curl in a slot between two houses. She might have died of anything or everything. Hunger must have plagued her night and day throughout her six or seven years, as disease had flayed away at the soft skin of her face and left it in tatters. But he could see no specific wounds on her to tell why this alley should have been the place of her final nap.

After alerting the watchmen and overseeing her removal, the thief-taker hurried into Princes Street to return to their owner the stolen silks that had brought him down through Southwark

Beginning as a poet in Minnesota, Keith Heller wrote for small magazines while he worked as a university English teacher in the United States, Japan, Spain, and Argentina. In the mid eighties he produced three historical crime novels for Collins Publishers in the U.K., two of which were reprinted by Scribners in the U.S. His latest novel, from Headline U.K., is *Snow on the Moon, a* Holocaust story set in Spain in 1945. †

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tonight. It was still early when he had collected his reward, but the cold December night had turned rainy and black, and his walk back into the City and to his fire in Hog Lane seemed monstrously long. As he trudged up High and Church Streets, he found himself steering vaguely in the direction of Lambeth and the stand of newly built residences there known as Hercules Buildings. By that route, at least, he might find someone to pour him a hot gin and help him forget the milky smell that the dead girl's bare legs had given off as the watchman had hoisted her heavily onto his shoulders.

When Dance finally came to Number 13, he hesitated in front of the three-story brick house and studied the lights playing in its latticed windows. He let the winds off the surrounding blank fields bandy him forward and back as he tried to determine if the woman of the house were alone or not. He saw her shadow pass from window to window and floor to floor, but he waited an extra half-hour to make sure that the husband's harder shadow was not moving about as well. The thief-taker dreaded meeting the man on his own turf and having to listen to his religious rantings and his fiery jealousy. He would rather stand where he was and freeze.

But eventually Dance's sore throat and a peculiar moaning in the distant marshes nudged him on, and he started knocking on the door just as a darker rain from the north came down in a terrible squall, as if heaven itself were sorry for what it had done.

Catherine Blake trundled her old friend up close to the fire and silently thanked God that William was out dining with some noble clients. The artist would never have understood how she'd felt about Dance ever since their childhood days together in Battersea —the sisterly closeness between them, which every now and then fluctuated into something warmer and more dizzying. But her conscience was clear. After more than ten years of marriage to a man as full of visions as William was, who could have room in her heart for anyone else?

As the hot gin restored some color to the thief-taker's pale features, Catherine began asking her friend what had brought him out so far on such a night, and he told her all about the silks and the gentleman in Princes Street.

"But it isn't that old miser that has me shaking." He held the cup between his hands and shivered. "It's just that I found another one tonight, another bandy child. That makes three this month alone, and that's three too many for me."

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"A bandy child?"

"Bandy children," Dance explained, "are those poor girls and boys in the workhouses and the streets whose legs are not sturdy enough to let them stand straight and whose knees are bowed outward as if they were carrying awful burdens. As they are, most of them," he whispered to himself. "As they most certainly are."

"And are there really so many of them," Catherine wondered, "that they have their own name in our language?"

"London is built upon their bandy legs, from the octagon in Golden Square to the kennels down in Wapping. Even here," he went on, eyeing the comparative luxury of the Blakes' new house, "none of these fine woods and furnishings would be possible without whole neighborhoods of workers and their children who put it all together and enjoy nothing of their labors. Sometimes one forgets such truths when one moves out of Poland Street and into the new and higher airs of Lambeth."

There was a note of criticism in his voice that darkened the woman's face and made her bustle for some sweets. She was still not completely comfortable with the new house, or with her husband's growing success in his work. Lambeth was too new to her, too wide and naked, and sometimes she found herself yearning for the jumbled alleys of the City and all their human noises. Out here, marketing was hard to do, the winds were almost as cold as her neighbors, and the nearby marshes gave off odors that were not nearly as recognizable as those floating out of Fleet Prison. Catherine never told her husband how she felt because they had both agreed to the move in order to find some peace and quiet, although now she wondered if he might not be feeling as dislocated as she. He spent most of his nights in the City.

"But you don't think the poor angel was murdered, do you?" she asked the thief-taker as she passed him a plate loaded down with iced jumbals. "Our streets haven't gone back to that, have they?"

"I don't know," Dance said as he toyed with the biscuit, which was shaped like a twin finger-ring. "There is still much savagery in them, and there is a worse meanness in the air now, the kind of hard righteousness that comes over people as soon as they have won out over their neighbors. It's what makes for such marvels as the Association for Preserving Liberty and Property Against Republicans and Levellers. As if London needed any association to help it along with that!"

"What is this association?" Mrs. Blake asked him.

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The thief-taker scowled over his gin. "Oh, only another one of those clubs where those that have can tell each other how they are so much different and better than those that don't have. They say, of course, that they only want to ready the nation for a war with France. But I've spoken with a number of them," Dance added darkly, "and all they can talk about is how unhappiness is all an illusion, how inescapable or imaginary is the discontent of those who have nothing, and how society cannot exist without a class of poor. To hear such men as Will Vincent tell it, children dying in the streets is as necessary to the nation as trade and labor, and there could be nothing more natural on earth than for a poor girl to give birth in a ditch to a girl who should sometime later give birth in another ditch. It can't be helped, as long as there are so many who choose to hunger and fail and die like dogs. Pity and mercy are wonderful feelings, but they would be no more if we did not make somebody poor.

"London has landed on her bandy children, Catherine," Dance concluded, "in her infinite glory, as if in a pair of hob boots. I don't even think she misses all these children I've been finding of late in her streets, no more so than if they were only so many peelings off the skin of a fruit. All that matters is the juice."

Catherine sat back, trying to see what Dance had described more clearly. Then she reminded her friend of such fine places as the Orphans Working School up north and the Asylum for Female Orphans just around the corner in Westminster Bridge Road. Surely these institutions were admirable in what they were trying to do?

The thief-taker got slowly to his feet and looked down into the woman's face. Catherine Boucher of Battersea had become the steady wife of the town's most eccentric artist, and now, after more than a decade of marriage and still childless, there was a leaden solidity to her that he had not remembered from her girlhood. She was capable and dutiful, and she was contented with her life, and she was even showing some of the signs of spiritual growth that come with such a secure daily round of cleanliness and success. But the mere mention of the dead child had almost threatened to spill her back out of her chair. It was not only sympathy that he saw in her now, but the desperation of a love that too often had to sit twiddling its thumbs.

"Perhaps you should go see for yourself," Dance told her as he reached for the door. "Go to the asylum on the corner and ask for

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Dame Lurch. She's the lady who helps run it. She can tell you more than I ever could. All I know is what I find in the street," he murmured dully. "And that only teaches me how to weep."

The next morning found Catherine standing in a courtyard in front of the asylum's chapel with a skirt of dusty, clamoring children surging all around her. There were faces of eagerness and comedy at her knees, faces of wonder and pride, and even a few of hatred and distrust. But they were all uniformly smeared with dirt and a covering of careful hopelessness, as if it were safer for them to love nothing than to be able to love only a little. They had pounced upon her as if she had brought them a new toy or a pet to while away the few minutes until their next bout of labor or punishment.

Next to Catherine stood a long, dry slice of a woman with no hips or breasts and a mouth that had grown so tight that the lips had all but disappeared. Dame Lurch had been a leader in the workhouse community for as long as anyone could remember, and it was she who had worked the hardest to bring more and more children in out of sick houses and off the streets. In her mind, there were no bad children, only bad families without a Christian sense of right and wrong or the ability to work harder. Her calling was to save the innocent from the guilty and to educate the young in the lessons of humility and patience. However badly God needed these discarded children to be poor and miserable, He loved them still, and He sent out women like Dame Lurch to teach them how to suffer silently as they waited for a better world to bring them rest.

"As you can see, Mrs. Blake," she crowed, "these are all my babes. In the rooms and halls of this asylum, I have given birth to each and every one of them. And even if they have to leave here someday and have sick children of their own—as we know they will—then their children shall become mine, and their only memory of mothering will be when they lisp 'Dame Lurch.' I'm without child myself," she sighed, "but with the help of God I've become big with the whole of London, and my laborings shall never cease!"

Catherine turned away from her, preferring to see the energy of the children around her rather than the insect shell of pride and righteousness that hung on Dame Lurch like a surplice. The children all welcomed her attention and acted out sad pantomimes of

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playfulness or maturity. A cold hand closed about Catherine's heart and would not let it go.

When Dame Lurch saw how the children had gathered around Mrs. Blake, she shifted closer to share in some of the affection, but the clucking brood of orphans shrank back from her as if they were trying to escape the onrush of an icy surf.

"Have any of the dead children come from here?" Catherine asked out of the children's hearing. "I ask," Catherine repeated her excuse, "only as a way to gather better information for that church I was telling you about, our Swedenborgian New Jerusalem."

"Oh, no more than fifty or sixty percent, I should imagine," the thin woman said, "and that is not so many, considering what low stock we have to deal with."

"Low stock?"

"You have to understand, my dear, that when a child is born into a family where the father is indolent and the mother is bad, or when the mother has the child alone when she is too young to care for it, then such children cannot help but be bad. We do all that we can for them, but many times they run off, or are cast out by the other children, or perhaps their mothers or fathers steal or buy them back. It is a terrible burden we all have to bear in the good-works trade," the knife of a mouth said, "the effects of the sins of the undeserving."

"And there's nothing that the City itself can do?" Catherine inquired as they moved across the courtyard together.

"It does what it can, but such things are best left to private charitableness. Why should all citizens have to pay for the weaknesses of a few? It wouldn't be fair."

"Yet," Catherine pointed out, "we all have to pay for the children's suffering and crimes once they are back out in the streets. We even have to pay for their sad burials."

"True, true. But you know how people are, Mrs. Blake. None of us wants to do anything for anyone but ourselves."

Catherine looked around at the high walls and the closed and guarded windows and at the children who were running and jumping like calves in a pen at a slaughterhouse. She shivered and turned back to Dame Lurch.

"Are the children safe here, at least?" she asked.

"Safer than they could ever be out in the streets. You know, even grown men and women fall in our lanes and alleys like mice.

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These are bad times to be caught out in the open, what with every vice in the world flourishing and the French waiting to kill us all in our sleep."

"They seem—happy," Catherine said as honestly as she could, stepping aside to pass by two scuffling boys.

The overseer clasped her hands across her chest. "They have good food and good teaching to keep them whole. What more could any lost child need?"

"Toys?" the visitor suggested. "Games?"

"Work is their game," Dame Lurch said sternly, "and needles and hammers are their toys. They had enough of the playthings of the Devil when they were in their first homes. They need no more of them here."

"Do you ever take them out?" Catherine asked after they had finally reached the door.

"Out? But where would they ever want to go?"

"Oh, to explore the neighborhood, visit Astley's—"

"What is this Astley's?" the asylum keeper asked curiously.

Catherine frowned and told her about Philip Astley's popular circus and amphitheater only a few streets away toward the river. "I only thought," she said, "that the children themselves should be anxious to go. It might be the first place to look, don't you see, if any of them run away and get lost in the dark streets. Surely you wouldn't want to wait until you find them all dead on the stones?"

"Of course not," Dame Lurch agreed, and then her face went blank. "But what happens outside of this asylum is out of my hands, Mrs. Blake. Sometimes, you understand, these children are simply born to die."

She shut the gate behind her and left Catherine standing in Westminster Bridge Road, as alone and unsatisfied as she had been when she went in. Behind the walls, the shouts and the laughter of the children, invisible now, could be heard fading away, as if the orphans had been stranded forever on the surface of the afternoon moon overhead.

"You want me to introduce you to Reverend Newton?" William Blake said over that night's pie of fleshmeat and dried fruits. "One of the leaders in the Philanthropic Society and Female Reform? A man of the regiment and Parliament? Wife, have you seen their houses in Ebenezar Place? They shine in the sun as if they were angels' wings. And these are the same people you expect me to

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offend with these womanly fantasies of yours? What can you be thinking? Only of yourself again?"

The artist's jowled face shook as he unloaded serving plates and sloshed wine into his favorite cup. His hair was wild and his eyes hot, and the hands that were permanently stained by inks and acids clambered on the table with frustration at his wife's fatal innocence.

But the woman across from him stood tall, and even when she sat back down her determination seemed to make her even wider in girth than she was.

"Haven't you been hearing me, husband?" Catherine cried out. "After my hour at Dame Lurch's, I went to the Society, and though they wouldn't let me in, I was able to talk to the man who stands at the gate. And he told me more than any happy woman should ever wish to hear."

"You talked to what man?" Blake asked. "In the open street? Did anyone see you?"

"It doesn't matter who saw what," she insisted. "What I want you to understand is what he told me. There have been hundreds of children dying in the streets during these past few months, more than ever before, hundreds of bandy children who have been found dead from no visible cause and for no apparent reason. And then he went on to say—"

"Bandy children?" her husband interrupted her.

She explained and then continued, "The fellow could not give me any exact numbers, but he knows of dozens in Westminster and Southwark, and he's sure of scores of others in the City. We have never wanted for dead babes in London, William, but most of these have been healthy children, or at least as healthy as such lambs ever get. There's no sense to it, no sense at all, and even Dame Lurch didn't seem very anxious to speak with me on the subject. I almost felt she wished I hadn't come there at all."

"Or she only wished you would leave her work to her and the rest of those who know how to do it." The artist tried not to let go of his temper. He knew of his wife's loneliness with only the two of them, and though he could not address it directly, he did what he could to soothe her troubled heart. "Catherine, don't we all have enough troubles these times with everyone believing that the best way to prepare for peace is to prepare for war? If there are more children dying than ever before, perhaps it's because there are more fathers and mothers in despair and more poor laws and

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workhouses. Why must you always imagine more evil than there already is in our fallen world? Wasn't it enough that God should have taken my poor mother from us in September and left us alone with no one to take her place?"

He tried to calm himself, but the great sorrow overcame him, and husband and wife sat for a minute in a silence that deepened the room. After a while, Blake shook his head and raised it again to try to make his wife listen to reason.

"It's not that I don't despair over these bandy children, as you call them," he went on. "I do. You know that children are all my theme, in my etchings and my poems. And I know as well as anyone that the rich are rich because the poor are poor, and I know that many die in order that a few may live. Innocence means nothing these days. Only hard experience can help us survive now, and even that . . ."

Rising to his feet, the artist wandered thoughtfully over to a front window. "But you have to understand my situation just now in the City. I am getting more and more attention from people who can help me, more exhibitions and more commissions, and every day I meet more of the wealthy and the powerful who might further my ambitions. Just today, I was with a man who could save my life by a lift of a finger. Who could save both our lives, Catherine! How can you expect me to endanger any of this just now? You must see how little I can do, how much we both finally have to lose?"

A long silence fell as the wife cleared the table and tended the candles. The shadow of the man at the window lengthened, then faded as the wind played with the light in the street. Finally, a rattling wheel blew down the lane, leaving the house even quieter than before, and Catherine came to lay a steady hand on her husband's stronger forearm.

"You know, William, that I am just come thirty, and you know that we are still alone in our new home. I try never to worry you about it, but it is a pain in me that I cannot swallow away, and I lie awake at night listening for a small voice to call out for me to come with water." Her voice aged in the dark, and her body moved against his. "Let me have these sad, lost children, William. Let me try to save at least as many as I should have been mothering myself by now. You owe me that much. I owe that much to myself."

Uncharacteristically, the artist reached out and surrounded his

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sobbing wife with his arms and held her against his chest as the night grew older outside. For a moment, he thought he saw an outline of a tiny animal, flattened in the street. But then he knew it was nothing but a silken scarf, and he led his wife toward their bed, telling her that he would see what he could do.

Catherine's interview with Reverend Newton was no more worthwhile than her talk with Dame Lurch had been. Both philanthropists had the same things to say. "Here at the Society, Mrs. Blake, we have only enough resources to help those who want to do something for themselves. Whoever has no carriage must ride a horse," Reverend Newton philosophized around his pipe, "and whoever is without a horse must walk on the two feet God has given him. We can help show him the way and perhaps even put a coat on his back, but no nation can subsidize all of life's journey for all its citizens. It wouldn't be practical, and it wouldn't be healthy. The poorer classes cannot be burdened with too much charity, or they will be encouraged to become too slack in their habits to give an honest return on what they've been given. The richer classes, of course, know how to handle what our Scottish friends call their 'official perks' much more wisely, and they can therefore be entrusted with quite a bit more."

"And the impoverished mothers and their children?" Catherine asked. "What's to be done with them?"

"Well, our Female Reform does what it can, doesn't it, but a woman is only a woman and a mistake is always a mistake, and one can hardly ask our government to pay for their indulged pleasures and lower, animal passions. Humanity, remember, is poisoned at its source, and goodness is only the rarest of exceptions. If we forgave everyone who sinned, how could we ever afford to give rewards to those who are by nature better?"

"But I thought that our religion bids us to do everything we can for one and all."

The philanthropist beamed at her. "I could show you women, Mrs. Blake, who care no more for their children than their mothers cared for them—who have less concern for them than a bitch shows for its whelps. Why should England love those who do not even love their own?"

"We all err," she reminded him, "sometime or other. Fear and hunger and despair—"

"True," Reverend Newton said, dipping his head in benign

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understanding, "but few have the wherewithal to buy their way out of their errors. Leave the bandy children to fall where they may," he concluded. "They are in the care of the innocence which your husband himself has written so eloquently about. What more could any of them ask for but to be lambs of Christ? 'O what a multitude they seem, these flowers of London town!' Isn't that right, though? Isn't that a truly nobler end for them all?"

Time passed, and it was not until the beginning of February, when London was mad with war fever, that Catherine heard a hurried knocking on her door. William was out again, this time in a protest of Parliament's recent vote to prepare for a war against France, but she peeked out enough to glimpse the shivering figure of Saunders Dance returned to her yard. This time, her childhood friend said they had no time for hot gin.

"Something is wrong," he rasped out at her, "and it seems to be more than just this coming war. The children, Catherine. They have all disappeared."

As the woman ran for a wrap, the thief-taker told her about his latest perceptions of the streets of London.

"I don't know, but since the town has gone so mad for a war, I've been noticing that none of the bandy children seem to be out anymore. It's as if someone has found them homes at last or maybe has his own reasons for keeping them behind closed gates. But in the past few weeks, I haven't found even one dead or dying child anywhere in London or Westminster or Southwark.

"Strange," he said more quietly, "I should be overjoyed, but I'm not. At least before, I knew what was happening to them. Now, I can't help but wonder whether there isn't something worse."

"But where shall we go?" Catherine asked. "Are we to wander aimlessly about from alley to alley, calling out names we don't even know?"

Dance looked put out. "Is there anywhere the children might have gone to gather together on their own, assuming that they're still free and at large?"

Remembering her conversation with Dame Lurch, the woman led her friend back out into the night and between some buildings at Carlisle School, up Royal Row, and around into Stangate Street to a large, dark building in Amphitheater Row. Astley's Theater was quiet now, its manager having accompanied the Duke of York to the Continent to superintend the embarkation of cavalry. But

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still a muted memory of dancing horses and dramatic spectacles wafted out of the Royal Grove and vied with the nearby river in populating the night with haunted, troubling voices.

"Why have you brought us here?" Dance asked as they stood in the middle of the midnight street. "What makes you think we might find any of the lost children in such a place as this?"

"Because I do not believe for a moment," Catherine answered, "that any woman who cares for children every day would not know where most of them would dream of coming to play."

As they approached the black structure, the thief-taker had to ask his old friend how she imagined they might get in.

She pulled an ancient key out of a dress pocket. "Mr. Philip Astley owns a house only two doors down from ours. He's the kind of man who would do anything for a neighbor," she faltered, "who might be thinking of starting her own free asylum for orphans."

Creaking open the outer door seemed to awaken in the bowels of the theater a responsive hum as of thousands of bees hidden in a wooden barrel. The ghosts' murmur tripped up Dance as he walked forward, but Catherine only plucked at his coat and whispered an enigmatic word or two about regiments, and then they were passing down a dark hallway toward the enclosed ground. Uncertain lights grew steadier before them, and the humming rose into quiet complaining as they felt their way up an incline that opened out beneath a gallery and two tiers of boxes. And then they came out under the high ceiling and saw what they would never have thought possible outside of a nightmare.

Down in the fully covered arena where trained horses usually pranced to music, countless families of unloved children had been rounded up together into a single unsettled herd. They flickered from side to side, uneasy and weary, wanting their awful freedom, yet fastened into place by a general smell of warm soup. Circling them like shepherds, a few men were keeping them in order and now beginning to steer them gradually toward an exit on the opposite, river side of the amphitheater. At the tail of the procession of innocents, striding like a general marshaling his troops, could be seen the imperious posture of Reverend Newton, now in command of a regiment he no longer had to despise. And beside him, as if she were a goosemaid scattering feed, Dame Lurch stumbled angrily ahead, cursing her damned gaggle for getting under her feet.

"Quickly!" Catherine said to the thief-taker. "We must hurry

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round to the other side and stop them before they reach the river with the children."

"Why?" he asked her. "You can't mean—"

"What else?" The woman's face had grown wild and fearless in the dark. "What could all the deaths of the other children have been but rehearsals for this one great and final massacre?"

William Blake wavered in spite of himself, though he had promised to tell his wife everything he had learned and hold nothing back. Some news was simply too wretched to be repeated, so he softened some of the details and sheltered them both from most of the uglier truths. Nevertheless, outside their sitting-room window, the February morning appeared more bleak than it should have, and even the cold blue of the sky above seemed watered down.

"The fact is," he continued, "Reverend Newton and Dame Lurch had quite a profitable business going for a while. For a few months, as the prospect of war drew nearer, they practiced in the night streets with as many homeless children as they found on their own, smothering or starving them simply to see if anyone in London might come forward to claim the poor little ones or their bodies. Once they found out that few did, they felt more bold and ready to try their grand scheme, and that is what you, wife, were somehow fortunate enough to stumble across and stop.

"I still don't see," Blake added in an aside, "how even one good woman could have been able to stand between the river and a horde of children made groggy by a mixture of laudanum and soup. How did you ever manage it all on your own?"

"Oh, William," Catherine said hurriedly, "what should any of that matter now? What I still don't understand is why Dame Lurch and the Reverend should want to do such a frightful thing? Were the two of them mad? Is that all it was?"

The artist shook his head, thoughtful and sorrowing. "No, it was something far more human than simple insanity. It was the war and Newton's base desire for gain. He was a procurer of men into the army, earning a certain amount for every recruit he was able to lure or trick into the ranks. But enough was never enough for him, as it never is for his kind, so he hit upon this devil's scheme of supplying the names of forgotten children in a list of soldiers who never existed. That way, he could earn more money with less and less work, and when the regiments fell short, he would simply

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argue that the men had disappeared by death or desertion. In a war panic, checking the rolls is always an early casualty. Yet he needed family names known to neighbors, while still not letting any of the children grow old enough to challenge his tale. It was the perfect business—no costs and nothing but returns—and even the asylums were happier as they seemed to be succeeding at reducing the number of orphans in their houses. Everyone gained—except, of course, the children, who would be at the bottom of the Thames, nameless and unmourned."

Their cozy house grew colder for a moment as the couple said a silent prayer, now that the worst was past.

"And Mrs. Lurch?" Catherine finally asked.

"Well, I'm afraid that she is mad indeed." The artist looked away. "She's—barren, and the thought of that made her hope that all these dead children would in some way be waiting for her with God and that she might be a mother to them in heaven. It's tragic to think of, but sometimes some women—"

Blake could not go on, but he need not have worried. Behind him, his wife had suddenly bustled to her feet and begun readying herself to go out. She had a huge basket of food, some clothing, and a small sack of brand-new playthings.

"You're not going to Astley's again today, are you, wife? I thought you were almost done with that crowd of infants. How many hundreds do you have left?"

Catherine turned back to her husband for a moment and smiled a wise and patient smile.

"Just a few days more, William, and then we shall have every child fed and clothed and ready to be returned to better asylums. You wouldn't want me to disappoint them now, would you?"

Blake regarded his wife's eyes, clearer now than he had seen them in months, and he laughed as he came up to join her.

"Why shouldn't the little vagabonds enjoy a few days of food and caring?" he said as they stepped out into the keen air. "Why don't we bring them some ale, too? If the church could provide us all with enough of such things, there'd be no more of this hell on earth."

They walked off together toward the river, wife and husband holding the basket between them, and it was not until the theater loomed above them that Catherine decided to tell him of her plans for the next hundred or so bandy children. ●

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LEOPOLD'S AIM

by Edward D. Hoch

Leopold began his final week as acting captain of the Violent Crimes Squad with a real sense that he'd been through it all before. He'd retired from the department at age sixty-five, then found himself called back after Captain Fletcher was downed by a bullet. Now Fletcher was returning, rested and whole again, and Leopold was one of many cheering him on.

"My last week," Leopold told his wife Molly that Monday night. "Next week I can help you out again if you have any problems." Molly was in private law practice and sometimes used him as a private investigator on difficult cases.

"I know Fletcher's been dying to get back. Carol says he's driving her crazy at home."

Molly had a fax machine at home for days when she didn't go in to the office, and Leopold had found it handy at times too. Her associate, Tom Griswald, sometimes sent her messages in the evening when he was working late at the office, so Leopold was not surprised when he heard the fax phone ring in the little office she'd set up in a spare bedroom. Since he was closest, he went in to pick up the message.

It was only one line of text, typed in capital letters in the center of a blank sheet of paper:

IF FLETCHER RETURNS TO WORK HE WILL DIE.

"What do you make of it?" he asked Molly, showing her the message.

"In the best of [the Leopold stories]," mystery writer Francis M. Nevins said in introducing one of Ed Hoch's collections, "Hoch fuses the detective gamesmanship of the Ellery Queen tradition with elements derived from Graham Greene and Georges Simenon, burying unexpected nuances of character and emotion beneath the surface of his deceptively simple style." Here is Leopold's 97th case. †

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"Someone with a warped sense of humor. He didn't register his name or number at the top of the page so we have no way of knowing who sent it."

He set it aside on the mantel, meaning to throw it away but not quite ready to do so yet.

Lieutenant Connie Trent was waiting for him when he arrived at the squad room before eight on Tuesday morning. "I found something strange when I came in, Captain."

"On the morning report?"

"No, on the fax machine."

"About Fletcher?"

"How'd you know?"

"I had a message at home last night. Let's see yours." She showed it to him. It was the same one-line warning he'd received.

"Do you think it's a serious threat?" she asked.

"Probably not, but it's odd all the same. Can you run a computer check on the cases he's handled, see if anyone likely was recently released from prison?"

She nodded. "Good idea."

He thought no more about it, turning his attention to crimes from the night before that had involved his squad. A shooting at a boarded-up drug house, a woman assaulted and robbed at a bank's ATM machine, a rape out at the college—they were the usual crimes of most any urban center. They were the crimes Leopold had faced all his life, the crimes to which Fletcher would be returning next Monday.

Shortly after ten o'clock he took a ride out to Fletcher's house. With their two children grown and away, Fletcher and Carol had thought about getting a smaller place, but for the present they were still in the house that Leopold had visited dozens of times for summer cookouts and Thanksgiving dinners. Their daughter Lisa answered his ring.

"Captain Leopold! It's good to see you again!"

"Hello, Lisa. How's your father doing?"

"He's anxious to get back to work. It bores him sitting around the house." Lisa Fletcher was almost thirty now, still with the high forehead and lovely face he remembered from her teen years. She'd graduated from college, moved into her own apartment, and surprised everyone by enrolling in the police academy. After a brief brush with some bad companions, she'd completed her train-

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ing and joined the force three years ago. Fletcher wasn't one to brag about his daughter but Leopold knew he was proud of her.

He found his friend sitting with Carol on the sun porch at the rear of the house. Fletcher got quickly to his feet and shook hands, as if to demonstrate that his body was fully mended from the shooting. "The only thing I regret about going back to work is that you'll be retired again," he said.

Carol asked her daughter to make some iced tea, and when Lisa was gone Leopold took the opportunity to show Fletcher the two faxed messages. "Any ideas about who sent them?"

Fletcher laughed it off, as Leopold knew he would. "If I worried about all the felons I've sent off to prison, I wouldn't have time for anything else."

Carol frowned at the messages. "Should we be concerned about this?" she asked Leopold.

"Certainly not at this stage," he answered gently. "I've got Connie checking the parole records for anyone we know who might have been recently released."

Lisa returned with the tea and Leopold slipped the messages into his inner pocket. There was no need to alarm everyone unnecessarily. An hour later, when he'd finished a pleasant visit and was on his way out, Fletcher walked him to the door. "Thanks for coming," he said. "I'm sure there's nothing to it."

When Leopold returned to the squad room shortly after noon, he found a grim-faced Connie Trent awaiting him. "There's been a second message, Captain."

"On the fax?"

She nodded and passed it to him. This time there were two lines typed in capital letters:

IF FLETCHER RETURNS TO WORK HE WILL DIE. HIS DAUGHTER LISA WILL DIE FIRST.

Leopold carefully placed the message flat on his desk, regarding it as one might examine a deadly sleeping spider. "Do we have any way to trace a fax message, Connie?"

"Only while the line is still open, which is usually less than a minute."

"Get the phone company to install one of those caller-ID devices. If he's used this fax twice he'll probably use it again."

"Then you think it's serious?"

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"Lisa Fletcher is out there on the street in uniform every day. She's an easy target."

"Patrol officers all wear bullet-resistant vests," she reminded him.

"And there's ammo available that'll rip right through them." He pondered what could be done without unnecessarily alarming Lisa or her father. Finally he reached for the telephone. "I'm going to call the chief, get Lisa assigned to a temporary desk job here in Violent Crimes. Just for a week or so till this blows over. I'll explain the circumstances to him."

"Do you think that's wise?"

"I remember the day she was born, Connie. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to her."

Leopold had to testify in a murder trial that afternoon, and he arrived at the courthouse still thinking about Fletcher and his daughter. At the top of the escalator was a little newsstand operated by a navy veteran everyone knew as Cap Bailey. He'd never been a captain but he'd lost his left hand in Vietnam, wounded by a mortar attack while on shore leave. The judges and lawyers all liked Cap, and they'd even arranged for an exception so he could continue selling cigarettes from his newsstand after smoking was banned in the building.

"How's it going, Captain?" he asked when he saw Leopold.

"Can't complain, Cap." He would have walked on by but his eye was caught by a small headline on the front page of the afternoon paper: *Parole for West Side Rapist.* He laid down fifty cents and bought a paper.

The crimes of the West Side Rapist, as the papers dubbed him, had been particularly brutal in nature. They'd happened about seven years earlier, while Leopold was still in charge of the Violent Crimes Squad, but it had been Fletcher's case from the beginning. The man, John Haines, was captured by Fletcher himself after a lengthy foot chase through an upscale west-side neighborhood. Fletcher confessed to Leopold later that he couldn't have gone on for another block.

Luckily he didn't have to.

As sometimes happened, it was the accused rapist who turned lucky at trial time. Because of some evidence problems, the D.A.'s office was forced to try him for only one of the assaults. The jury found him guilty, but without the evidence of the other crimes he received only a seven-to-ten-year sentence. He'd behaved himself behind bars and now he was out on parole.

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Leopold decided after his court testimony that afternoon to seek out John Haines.

It took him until Wednesday morning to reach the parole officer assigned to Haines and get his address. By that time Lisa Fletcher had reported for duty in the squad room. "What's this all about?" she wanted to know. "Has someone filed a complaint against me?"

"Nothing like that," Leopold assured her, leaning back in his chair and trying to act casual. "There've been some threats made against your dad and we're trying to check them out. I'm sure they're bogus."

"How does that involve me?"

"Your name was mentioned too. I thought it best to take you off the street for a few days."

"I think I'm entitled to more specific information than that."

Reluctantly he reached into his desk and took out the faxed messages, handing them to her. "It's nothing to worry about, but just be on your guard."

"This is all of it?"

"Yes. Is your apartment safe from intruders?"

She nodded. "I have my pistol and Ron has one too." Ron Younger was a handsome security guard, in his late thirties and separated from his wife. He'd been living with Lisa for the past few months. When Fletcher heard about it, shortly after he was shot, he asked Leopold to check him out. But Younger was clean except for the marital problems. He had no criminal record and had been at his present job for better than two years. There wasn't even a traffic ticket in the computer. Fletcher was unhappy about Lisa living with someone, perhaps remembering her companions of younger days, but she was twenty-nine years old and more than able to make her own decisions.

"Just keep alert for a few days. As soon as this blows over you can go back on regular duty."

She tried to smile. "Thank you, Captain."

The address the parole officer had given him for John Haines was a motel in one of the suburbs, near the turnpike. The place offered low weekly and monthly rates, and for that reason was popular with salesmen and other transients. When Haines answered the door Leopold saw a big man who still looked like the mug shots from seven years ago. Leopold introduced himself and

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showed his ID, but the man hesitated before letting him in. "I was just going out to look for an apartment."

"It won't take long," Leopold assured him. "I just want to talk to you."

"All right."

Leopold entered the stark motel room with its worn beige furniture and sat down on the sofa opposite Haines. "You remember Captain Fletcher, don't you? He was Lieutenant Fletcher when you knew him."

"I remember. He ran faster than me." He tried for an ironic smile that didn't quite come off.

"There's been a threat against his life. Naturally we're checking on recent parolees whose cases he handled."

"I'm not about to go back to prison for Fletcher or anyone else. I wouldn't go anywhere near him."

"I'm glad to hear that. Some of his family members have been threatened as well."

"I don't know anything about his family. All I remember thinking at the time was that this detective who had twenty years on me somehow managed to outrun me."

Leopold smiled. "You look in pretty good shape now. Prison must have agreed with you."

"I worked out. Gave me something to do."

"So next time you can outrun the cop who's chasing you?"

His gray eyes hardened, just for an instant. "I served my time. I'm trying for a fresh start. The story in yesterday's paper didn't help any."

"The community is concerned about paroled rapists."

John Haines stood up. "You got anything more to say?"

"No. Just keep your hands clean."

The next fax message was waiting for Leopold when he reached the squad room on Thursday morning:

FLETCHER HAS UNTIL NOON TODAY TO ANNOUNCE HIS RESIGNATION OR HIS DAUGHTER LISA WILL DIE.

Leopold glanced at it as if it were a piece of junk mail and asked, "Did you identify the sender, Connie?"

She shook her head. "It came from a fax machine at one of these commercial copy centers. Most customers pay in cash and transmit their own messages. The clerk didn't notice anything unusual about the customers using the machines at the time."

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"I'm certain it's a hoax. Still, maybe I'll suggest to Lisa that she and I have lunch in my office this noon. It'll keep her off the street, at least."

Lisa didn't question his suggestion and Leopold sent out for a small pizza.

He welcomed her into his glass-sided office and got out a knife and paper plates for the pizza. "Connie says you're doing a fine job here. Maybe you should think about staying."

Lisa grinned in appreciation but shook her head firmly. "I belong on the street. That's where the real police work is done. Just being away from it these few days makes me envious of Monica."

"Who's that?"

"She's taking my place on patrol this week."

It hadn't occurred to Leopold that Lisa might be replaced by another young woman. "What's she look like?" he asked casually, taking a bite of pizza.

"Tall like me. She used to have long brown hair but she had to cut it off. You know the regulations. Sometimes I think they want us all to look the same in uniform."

"Look the same," he repeated, half to himself. Suddenly he flipped on the intercom on his desk. When he heard Connie's voice he said, "Ring up the Mapleshade Division right away. They replaced Lisa on street patrol with someone who looks like her!"

By the time Leopold reached the scene it was much too late. The patrol car in which Lisa's substitute, a probationary officer named Monica North, had been riding responded to a 911 call from a pay phone on Flash Street about a robbery in progress. As Monica and her male partner exited their vehicle, a single shot from a high-powered rifle struck her in the back of the head, killing her instantly.

When she heard the news Lisa had insisted on coming along. Only a direct order from Leopold dissuaded her. "He may have done it just to lure you to the scene," he argued. "You could be putting other lives in danger."

So he was on the scene with Connie Trent, gazing down at the body of a young woman he'd never known wearing the uniform that meant so much to her, and to Lisa Fletcher. "We'll get him, Captain," Connie assured him, her mouth a grim line of determination.

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How many times before had he heard those words, Leopold wondered, spoken with the same unyielding passion? Often they did get him, or her, but sometimes it was not until more deaths had bloodied the streets of the city. "First we have to know what we're dealing with," Leopold said. "In the meantime, assign detectives to watch John Haines, that parolee."

"You think it might be him?"

"We've got no one else right now." As he spoke he watched a black limousine pull up across the street. He recognized the mayor at once, and the sight didn't surprise him. With an officer killed in the line of duty, a proper amount of civic outrage was mandatory. A truck from one of the local television stations pulled up behind the limo.

"I just got word, Captain," the mayor said, hurrying over to shake his hand. "This is a terrible thing. What do you make of it?"

"Too soon to tell," Leopold said. "There's no sign of a robbery in any of these stores. It looks as if the patrol car was lured here with the express purpose of killing police officers."

The mayor glanced around at the surrounding buildings. "Where did the shot come from?"

"We're still working that out. We have officers canvassing the neighborhood."

The television cameras were in position now and the mayor turned to make a statement. Leopold hurried off to join Connie Trent. "Any luck yet?"

She was squinting across the street. "The shot came from behind her, over that way. Since the angle seems to have been downward, it suggests someone on the roof, or else in an upper window of a building on the next block. With a good scope on the rifle he could have been a couple hundred yards away."

"Have someone check the roof," Leopold ordered. Another car had pulled up and he recognized it with a sinking feeling. It was Fletcher's green minivan. "What happened here?" Fletcher asked, hurrying toward Leopold and Connie. "I heard the report on the radio."

"Officer Monica North was gunned down," Connie told him. "Apparently she was lured into a trap by a false report of a crime."

Fletcher's eyes sought out the patrol car. "That's my daughter's cruiser."

Leopold flushed slightly, like a schoolboy caught at something

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bad. "She's been reassigned to our squad this week, a desk job. Monica North was filling in for her."

"Reassigned?"

"Just temporary."

Then the truth got through to him. "Those faxed messages you showed me! They made threats against Lisa too, didn't they?"

"We're investigating—"

"My God, Leopold! This girl was killed instead of Lisa!"

"We can't jump to that conclusion," he told his old friend. "I'm sorry, Fletcher, but you're not due back till Monday. You've got to let me handle this."

Connie led him away, speaking quietly, while Leopold turned his attention to Officer North's partner. His name was Kevin Connerhan and Leopold knew him slightly. The killing of his partner had left him in a state of shock. "What happened, Connerhan?"

"We were responding to a radio call of a robbery in progress," the young officer explained. "Monica was out of the car an instant before me and she took the bullet. I barely heard the shot. It was just a distant crack. It should have been me. That kid didn't deserve to die."

"It could have been you," Leopold said. "Or it could have been Lisa Fletcher. Maybe the killer just had a thing against cops in general."

An hour later he was back at headquarters, listening to the tape of the 911 call that had reported the robbery in progress. "That's an awfully high-pitched voice," he told Connie. "I can't even tell if it's male or female."

"I think he or she took a snort of helium just before calling. It distorts the voice like that."

"Helium?"

"A small balloon full would be enough. Sometimes they do it on those TV talk shows, just for a gag."

"So the recording is useless to us. Did your men find anything else?"

"Just this." She laid a plastic evidence bag on his desk. It contained a small pager. Kids wore them clipped to their belts when they were selling narcotics to other kids, and prostitutes used them when they were on call. "It was on that roof where the killer might have fired from. He may have dropped it in his getaway."

Leopold turned it over in his hand. "Check the serial number, find out who bought it."

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"The mayor wants action, Captain."

"I want action too. Mainly I want to keep Fletcher and his daughter alive until we find the killer."

"You think he was after Lisa?"

"That's our most likely motive right now. The way I see it, there are three possibilities. First, this killing might have been a random coincidence. I don't buy that. Second, he's trying to keep Fletcher off the job for some obscure reason."

"What's the third possibility?"

"That Lisa is the intended target and the threats against Fletcher are just a red herring."

"Who—?"

"I think I'll drive her home tonight."

Lisa Fletcher's place was a garden apartment on the north end of the city. She wasn't at all happy about accepting a ride home from Leopold when her own car was sitting in the police lot. "I really don't need a bodyguard, Captain. I have a pistol, you know."

"Monica North had one too. It didn't help her."

"This whole thing is crazy. Why would anyone try to kill me to keep my dad from going back on the job?"

"I don't know. We're working on a couple of angles."

"Ron's home already," she noted as he pulled into a parking space. "You can just leave me here."

"I'd like to meet your young man."

"He's not that young, and neither am I. We're both mature adults!"

"Did I say anything?" he asked innocently.

"I know Dad and Mom don't like us living together, but Ron had no place to stay. His wife kicked him out."

"That's what I'd like to talk to him about."

"She wouldn't—" Lisa began, suddenly realizing the direction of his thinking. Then she issued a reluctant invitation. "Come on in."

Leopold had seen Ron Younger once in a car with Lisa, but they hadn't been formally introduced. When he entered the apartment with her, Younger was still in his security-guard uniform, looking in the freezer for the makings of dinner. "Hello there," he said with a smile, giving Lisa a hug in greeting and then extending his hand to Leopold. "I'm Ron Younger. I think we almost met once at headquarters."

"Nice to really meet you this time."

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"Going to have dinner with us?"

"No, I just wanted to speak with you for a few minutes."

Lisa quickly broke in to explain. "Someone's been making anonymous threats against Dad and me. The officer taking my place in the patrol car this week was killed by a sniper this afternoon. Captain Leopold thinks I was the intended victim."

"Who would want to kill you?" he asked, frowning at her words. "Someone you arrested?"

"More likely someone my dad arrested."

Leopold cleared his throat. "Ron, I have to ask you a few questions. Please bear with me. I understand you're still legally married?"

"Only until Jenny signs the divorce papers."

"Does she know about Lisa?"

"Of course."

"I met her once, at a restaurant where Ron and I were having dinner. It wasn't too pleasant." Lisa shuddered slightly at the memory. "She came over to our table and started calling Ron names. He tried to introduce us but she wouldn't even acknowledge that I was there."

"Could you give me her name and address?" Leopold asked. "I'd like to speak with her."

Ron Younger frowned. "About what happened today?"

"It's possible that Lisa has been the target all along, and not her father. I have to rule that out by checking anyone who might have a motive to harm Lisa. Your wife probably qualifies."

Younger shook his head. "Jenny wouldn't hurt anyone. I couldn't live with her, but she certainly didn't try to kill Lisa with a high-powered rifle."

"What's her name? Jenny Younger?"

He nodded. "The address is 131 Old Post Road. It's a town house in a fairly new development. She may be out of the city, though. I've been trying to phone her about the divorce papers."

Leopold jotted it down. "Take care tonight, both of you. When he discovers he shot the wrong person he may try again." He didn't tell them he'd have a squad car assigned to the neighborhood all night. "If I need to reach you tomorrow, Ron, you're still working security for Sucric Confections?"

He nodded. "The company goes by several names, but call the main office and you can get through to me."

The address on Old Post Road was just across the city line, in an

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area developed about five years earlier on wooded land purchased from an adjoining private school. It was just dinnertime when Leopold drove up, and when no one answered his ring at 131 he tried the doorbell at 133, the other half of the double house.

After a moment a young woman in jeans and a white T-shirt answered the door. He showed his police ID and told her, "I'm looking for your neighbor, Jenny Younger. Is she away?"

The woman shrugged, a bit tense in the presence of a detective captain. "I guess so. She calls on stores for one of those cosmetics companies and she travels a lot."

"What's happening to her mail? Does her husband take it in?"

"No." She chuckled at the idea. "They're separated. I've got a key to her place, and if the mail starts piling up I open the door and put it on her table."

"Have you lived here long, Mrs.—?"

"Bess Greenfield. I'm not married." She'd relaxed a bit as they spoke. "I moved in about a year ago. Ron and Jenny were already here. We were friendly at first, but since the breakup I don't see much of her."

"What caused it? Another woman?"

"I don't know. He was a security guard doing shift work, odd hours. That didn't help."

"Miss Greenfield, I'm working on a murder case. A policewoman was shot and killed this afternoon. It might help my investigation if I could look inside Jenny Younger's house."

"Aren't you supposed to have a search warrant?"

"I won't be searching, only looking."

"All right," she said after a moment's consideration. "I'll get the key."

The other half of the double house was a mirror image of Bess Greenfield's half, perhaps less well furnished. A pile of a dozen or so catalogues and bills sat on an end table near the door. The oldest of them had been postmarked about three weeks earlier. There were no personal letters. Leopold walked out to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. It was fairly small and nearly empty except for a stack of frozen meals that had thawed and spoiled. "There's a freezer in the basement, along with a washer and dryer," Bess Greenfield volunteered. "All the units have them."

"It looks as if she was planning to be away for a while."

"She didn't tell me."

"Mind if I look upstairs?"

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In the bedroom he found a framed certificate awarding Jenny Younger first prize in a target-shooting contest sponsored by the National Rifle Association. Next to it was a photograph of a young woman holding a rifle with a scope attached.

"That's Jenny," Bess Greenfield said.

"I thought it might be." He thanked her and returned to his car.

By morning a television crew was camped outside headquarters, expecting some news of the investigation. When Leopold arrived at his office before eight o'clock, Connie Trent was waiting, holding an envelope. "Here are the photos of the crime scene. And Fletcher called to see if there was any progress. He says he's coming down."

"I don't want him here, Connie. He's too involved emotionally."

"I told him to stay away, but he feels if he looks over the list of recent parolees he might recognize a name."

"He can look over the list at home," Leopold grumbled. It was going to be bad enough having Lisa in the office all day. "What about the pager that was found on the roof? Have you traced it?"

"Yes. It was purchased by a man named Tyrone Chapel."

"Record?"

"One drug arrest a year ago. Charges were dropped for lack of evidence."

"Bring him in for questioning."

Leopold spent a lot of time that morning checking the fax machine, but no more threats arrived. It was almost as if the killer had finished his work.

Tyrone Chapel was a twenty-two-year-old black man with a shaved head and an understandable nervousness about being picked up for questioning. "You don't have any reason to arrest me," he said.

"We only want to ask you a few questions," Leopold told him, carefully laying the pager on the table between them. "I believe this is yours."

Chapel's eyes widened a bit. "I never saw it before."

"Come on, Tyrone! It has a serial number on it. The company says they sold it to you last year. Probably comes in handy in your drug business."

"I got no drug business," he insisted.

"Yesterday afternoon you were on the roof of a building on Flash

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Street when a policewoman was killed in an ambush. What do you know about that?"

"Nothing."

"That's where we found this pager. You were so anxious to get out of there, you dropped it."

He was silent for a few moments, perhaps weighing the possibilities. "I sold it to a kid last month. Don't know his name."

"We won't swallow that, Tyrone. This is a cop killing, and we can place you at the scene. You're taking the fall for this one."

A flicker of fear crossed his face. "I didn't kill her. It was someone in the building behind me, with a damned rifle."

"Did you see him?"

"I saw the barrel of the rifle come out the window. I was up there waiting for a guy, laying on my back watching the clouds. Man, I thought that rifle was aiming at me! I ran off the roof so fast I dropped my pager."

"You were selling drugs, weren't you? Was it coke, or pills like the last time you were arrested?"

"A little speed, nothing more. Give me a break, man!"

"Did you see who fired the shot?"

Chapel stared hard at the floor. "Just his hands. He might've had a bum hand."

"What do you mean?"

"All I saw was the hands on the rifle. One had a black glove on it, like it wasn't real."

"Which hand?"

"Right? No, left! The left hand. The one on the front stock of the rifle."

"Can you show us the window?" Leopold took out the photos of the crime scene, putting aside the pictures of the victim to concentrate on one showing the buildings across the street.

Tyrone Chapel took the photograph in his hands and studied it for a moment.

"I think it's this one, second from the end on the third floor. Can't be sure, though."

Leopold nodded. "I'll go have a look. You just relax for a while here. If you're leveling with us, you've got nothing to worry about."

Fletcher arrived just as he was getting ready to leave. "What have you got so far?" he wanted to know.

"We're following up on a few leads. Connie will tell you about it."

"Is Lisa here?"

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Leopold glanced around the squad room. "She must be taking a break."

"She says you finally met Ron. What do you think of him?"

Leopold shrugged. "Seems nice enough. Is there a big age difference?"

"Eight years. He's thirty-seven. That doesn't bother me, though. It's mostly that he's in the midst of a divorce. I hate to see Lisa involved with a divorced man."

"I was divorced once, way back," Leopold reminded him.

"I know, and you and Molly are an ideal couple. But a father has to look out for his daughter, even if she is twenty-nine years old. After I got shot and she started going with him, they came to see me in the hospital. I was alone with him for a few minutes and I asked if he'd mind me talking to his ex-wife after I was back."

Leopold shook his head. "Fletcher, what good would come of that? The woman would just fill your head with every bad thing Ron has ever done."

"He said they were on good terms."

"I've got to go out. Just think about it before you do something crazy. Talk to Carol about it. Your wife's a sensible woman."

Twenty minutes later Leopold parked in front of a five-story building a block over from the spot where Monica North had died. It was an older building dating from the 1920s, one that had a number of vacancies among the insurance agents and jewelers and sales offices that occupied it. He was not surprised to find that the office Chapel had indicated was one of the vacant ones. The lettering on the frosted glass still read *Circus Brand Candy Co.*, but the door was unlocked and the one-room office was empty. He went immediately to the window in question and examined the sill. There were no marks and he knew there would be no fingerprints. The killer had been wearing gloves, bad hand or not. He felt along the floor, hoping for an ejected cartridge case, and he was in luck. It was where he'd expected, just to the right of the window. He slipped it into a plastic evidence bag.

Leopold opened the dusty window and peered out. He had a clear view, a clear shot at the spot where the policewoman had been struck down. With a telescopic sight, the killer should have been able to see that it wasn't Lisa Fletcher.

If he knew what Lisa Fletcher looked like.

If he cared what Lisa Fletcher looked like.

Something new began gnawing at Leopold's brain.

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He closed the window and left the empty office.

It was late afternoon when Leopold returned to the squad room. Connie came into his office at once. "Bad news, Captain. I had people watching that parolee, John Haines, but somehow he gave them the slip."

"That's all right," he said with a sigh. "I'm after something else now. I've gotten Judge Baxter to sign a search warrant."

"For where?"

He told her and asked her to meet him there. Then he told Lisa he'd be driving her home again. They left a little after five and her first question was about progress on the case. "I think we've got a break at last," he said. "I'll explain when we get to your place."

Ron Younger had arrived home from work just ahead of them and Leopold called to him from the car. "Ron, I have something to tell you. I have a search warrant for the house where you and your wife lived. I believe she has a vital connection with this case."

Lisa gasped at his words. "You think Jenny Younger tried to kill me?"

"She certainly had a motive in her twisted mind, and I've learned that she once won a prize in a target-shooting contest. She owns a rifle, doesn't she?"

"Yes," Younger admitted. "But I can't believe—"

"That's what I'm searching for. Her rifle should be in the house. We've recovered the cartridge from the bullet that killed Officer North. The markings on the cartridge can be compared to ones fired from that rifle."

"How are you going to get in?" Younger asked. "I don't have a key anymore."

"I've established that a neighbor who shares the town house has a key. Connie should be out there now to meet us."

As they pulled up he could see Connie Trent standing with Bess Greenfield by the doors to the adjoining town houses. His heart sank as he saw that Fletcher was with her. "I couldn't keep him away, Captain," Connie quickly explained.

"Fletcher," Leopold told his old friend, "please leave this to us."

"I'm sorry. I have to be here. Lisa's life means more to me than anything."

Leopold turned to Bess Greenfield. "I have here a search warrant for the town house at 131 Old Post Road, occupied by Jenny

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Younger. This search warrant has been signed by Judge Baxter, and pursuant to it I instruct you to deliver to me the key to said property."

The woman stared at him wide-eyed and handed over the key. Leopold carefully unlocked the front door and they entered the town house. It seemed unchanged since his previous, unofficial visit. "Connie, you search upstairs," he said.

"I can help too," Fletcher said.

"I'd rather you didn't. Stay here with your daughter."

Ron Younger stepped forward. "Jenny kept her guns in the closet of the spare bedroom, at the front of the house."

"How many does she have?" Connie asked.

"Two high-powered rifles with scopes. It was just a hobby."

Leopold smiled slightly. "How come you didn't tell us about that hobby earlier, Ron?"

"I didn't know a high-powered rifle was involved."

"Sure you did! You mentioned it the afternoon of the killing when I brought Lisa home, before the word had gotten around."

Connie Trent had paused halfway up the stairs. Fletcher had suddenly tensed. They'd both seen Leopold in action many times before. Lisa Fletcher hadn't. "What's this all about?" she asked, still standing near the half-open door.

Leopold was staring at Ron Younger. "I guess you'd say it was about Circus Brand Candy, wouldn't you?"

Younger's hand touched the belt of his uniform and he took a slight step backward to Lisa's side, as if seeking her support. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"The shot that killed Officer Monica North was fired from a vacant office once used by the Circus Brand Candy Company. You're a security guard for Sucric Confections and you told me the other day they had lots of names. Surely one of them must be Circus Brand Candy. It's the same line of business and Sucric is Circus spelled backwards."

"My wife would have known that. I think I even mentioned that empty office to her once. Besides, I certainly have no motive for trying to harm Lisa!"

"I think you had a motive for what you did, Ron. A crazy, insane motive, but a motive nonetheless. Fletcher told you he wanted to talk to your wife when he got back to work. It was just a father looking out for his daughter, but to you it represented an immense threat. In a twisted way, you convinced yourself that if he didn't

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return to work he'd forget about seeking out Jenny. You even threatened Lisa to try and keep him away. You killed Officer North, knowing it wasn't Lisa, to further frighten her father. The timing would have been no problem since it was probably your lunch hour."

"This is insane!" Lisa yelled. "What are you saying? What difference would it make if Dad tried to see Jenny?"

"All the difference in the world," Leopold said quietly. "Because Ron has been speaking of her in the past tense ever since we got here. Because there are defrosted frozen foods in the kitchen refrigerator to make room for Jenny's body in the basement freezer."

The freezer had been a guess on Leopold's part, but it was all too accurate. Before any of them could move, Younger pulled the pistol from his holster and grabbed Lisa, pinning her arms to her sides. He yanked her backward toward the door, the barrel of the weapon pressed against her right ear. Leopold and Fletcher both had their weapons out, facing the man in the doorway.

"Drop your guns!" Younger shouted. "Drop your guns or she dies! I've killed two women already. A third won't bother me!"

"Drop it, Fletcher," Leopold said.

"She's my daughter!"

"You don't want to kill her. Drop it!"

"I'm in charge here!"

"Not till next Monday, you're not! Drop your weapon!"

"Both of you drop them or she's dead!" Younger yelled, pulling Lisa out the door.

Fletcher took a breath and let his pistol fall.

As it hit the floor, Leopold fired.

Then Connie was running to the screaming Lisa, cradling her in comforting arms. Fletcher leaned against the wall, ashen-faced, unable to speak for a moment. Finally Leopold said, "We'd better go check that freezer."

Fletcher bent to retrieve his weapon. "I know why you told me to drop it," he decided. "You didn't want me to be the one who killed him."

"No," Leopold said, looking over at Lisa's tear-streaked face. "I didn't want you to be the one who missed." ●

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Art by Theodore Iszler

Copy Dog

by Ralph McInerny

They hadn't been in the house a week when they heard the dramatic story of Mrs. Leahy, the woman next door. Half a year before, her husband had disappeared. Into thin air. One day he was there and then he wasn't.

"Did he go off to work?"

"It was a weekend."

Marge Blewitt, who lived on the *other* side, got more comfortable in her kitchen chair. Jane had asked her in and served her coffee, hoping to get the full story on the missing husband. The day before, Marge had had to run off right after giving a tantalizing answer to Jane's question about the occupants of the house to the north.

"There's just her."

"A widow?"

"Well, he's gone."

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"Gone?"

"Apparently he ran away." But now, with the leisure to expand, Marge described what had happened and how excited they had all been at the time. All the neighbors were questioned by the police, again and again.

"Their main concern was, how had the Leahys got along."

"What was the answer?"

"As far as any of us knew they got along fine. Very lovey-dovey, at least in public, but I'm always suspicious of that." Marge paused to lick her lips, tempted to expand on her suspicion, but theory could wait for another day. "He had a tongue."

"What do you mean?"

"You know how some husbands treat their wives in public. Putting them down."

Marge seemed ready to go off on that tangent, but she must have seen how eager Jane was to get the whole story.

"Did they search for him?"

"They probably still are. Not that that means much. They just circulate a picture and wait for someone to say they've seen him."

"And no one has?"

"Not lately. Oh, at first there were sightings reported almost daily. Sheila actually flew to Denver once to verify that the vagrant they were holding was not her Alec."

"They were all false alarms?"

"He just disappeared," Marge said, her hand rising like a bird in flight. She added in an awed voice, "Into thin air."

"But that's not possible."

"That's what Sheila kept saying."

"The poor woman."

A most prolific mystery writer, Ralph McInerny will be launching a new series in 1997 with the novel *Upon This Rockne* (St. Martin's Press). Set at Notre Dame, where its author teaches, the book will showcase the dark humor for which Dr. McInerny is known—and which he exhibits in this new story. Readers may also want to see *The Tears of Things*, the new Father Dowling mystery, or *Half Past Nun*, a Sister Mary Teresa novel. ✝

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The story invested Sheila Leahy with an aura of mystery, of tragedy, and Jane found herself trying to catch glimpses of her abandoned neighbor, but Mrs. Leahy was seldom in the yard. Except to mow. Jane seized the opportunity to go out and talk with her.

"Do you always mow the lawn by yourself?"

Sheila had soft white skin with just the blush of redness on her cheeks, natural coloring. Her eyes were gray and looked as if they had peered deeply into the mystery of life. She seemed such a petite thing to be guiding that noisy mower around her yard.

"I have no choice."

"Aren't there any boys in the neighborhood . . . ?" Jane stopped. "Jim, my husband, insists on mowing."

"So did my husband."

"Oh."

The gray eyes made Jane feel uneasy and in the ensuing silence she had a desperate desire to apologize. But for what? For all Sheila knew, Jane had never heard about her husband.

"I lost my husband."

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"I thought perhaps you knew."

"No," Jane lied and was certain that Sheila knew she was lying.

"There was so much publicity."

"But what happened?"

"I don't know."

She said this in a steady voice and it was Jane who burst into tears. "Oh, you poor thing."

Sheila seemed startled by the intensity of the reaction. She actually stepped back, as if she feared Jane was going to throw her arms around her and console her at the loss of her husband.

"That's a story by Hawthorne," Jim said from behind his paper when she settled down to give him the details.

"Hawthorne."

The paper dropped to his lap. He sat with his eyes shut. "A man leaves his house and is never seen again. Until many years later. It turns out that all the time he was living in the next block."

Jane was furious. What did that silly story have to do with the disappearance of Sheila's husband? "Don't you want to hear about it?"

"Sure." His tone was tolerant and she stared at him. Didn't he

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see how serious a thing like this was? Anger rose in her and she almost expressed the thought that leapt to her mind: *Sometimes I wish you'd disappear.*

Of course she didn't say it. She hadn't thought it, not really. It was just that she felt so sorry for Mrs. Leahy and Jim's first reaction was to be reminded of some silly story. She told him what she had learned, of course, but quickly, just rattling it off. If he didn't want to wallow in it with her, well, she would wallow in it alone. Later, after Jim was asleep, she got out of bed and crept across the hall to the room from which she could see the Leahy house.

The light on in the living room was obviously a night-light, or so Jane thought. It added an extra note of sadness. Poor Sheila Leahy, all alone in the house she had shared with her husband, gone now, disappeared, no one even knowing what had happened to him. The night-light was a symbol of vulnerability. Did Sheila imagine someone was watching her house? Her husband? Jane wanted to wake Jim up and ask him if they had a copy of the story by Hawthorne he had mentioned. Had the man in the story kept an eye on the house and family he had abandoned?

Jane crept shivering downstairs, wishing she had put on a robe. In the living room, she sat on the edge of the couch and looked out at the street, half expecting, half fearful that she would see a man out there. Of course she imagined she did, but each time a passing car made the phantom watcher disappear.

"Jane?"

It was Jim. She sprang up from the couch and banged into the coffee table, sending the pieces of pewter clanging in the dark. The hall light went on, turned on by Jim upstairs.

"Are you down there?" His voice was tense.

"Yes, it's me. I'm coming up."

She hurried up the stairs. A puzzled Jim stared at her.

"What were you doing?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"Were you sitting in the dark?"

"I was on the couch."

He lifted his brows and gave her a half grin.

"Sleeping on the couch? Am I being punished?"

"No, I am. I have a headache."

"That's my girl."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't claim Mother Nature is punishing me, can I?"

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"No one is punishing you."

They went back to bed, where she proved she wasn't.

"I thought you had a headache," he said afterward.

"It went away."

"Well, now we know the cure." A minute later, from the bathroom, he called, "There's a light on next door."

"Which side?"

"The side you can see from the bathroom. Leahys."

"It's a night-light."

"You're probably right," he said when he got back into bed.

Resolving to conquer her curiosity about the woman next door was like quitting smoking had been. She spent most of the time thinking of what she wasn't going to think about. It was morbid curiosity and it didn't even have the excuse that she knew the woman. Mrs. Leahy was a perfect stranger, even if she did live next door.

About one o'clock the next afternoon, Mrs. Leahy backed the car out of her garage and drove away. Jane felt relieved of her vigil. She lay down for half an hour, tired because of her restless night, but she lay with open eyes staring at the ceiling where all the things she should be doing seemed written in big capital letters. The thought of going to the supermarket nearly put her to sleep. Just forty winks, she promised, but her conscience had been aroused and there was no hope of sleep. Sighing, she swung her legs off the bed and groped for her shoes with prehensile toes. Maybe there would be time for a little nap when she returned from shopping.

When she turned from the meat counter she saw Mrs. Leahy two thirds of the way down an aisle, carefully placing cans in her cart. Jane wanted to roll right up to her neighbor and say hello, but after all her efforts to spy on Mrs. Leahy she felt sheepish and held back. She waited for Mrs. Leahy to start off and leave the aisle and then followed. Two thirds of the way up she stopped. Pet food! That was what she had been buying.

"Jim, have you ever noticed a dog next door?"

"Do they have one?"

"I mean the other side. Mrs. Leahy."

"What kind of dog does she have?"

"I've never seen it."

She explained about seeing Mrs. Leahy stocking up on pet food at the supermarket.

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"She better keep it in her own yard."

"That's not very neighborly."

"Do you want to mow the lawn?"

"Oh."

If Mrs. Leahy had a dog it was no more in evidence than her husband. After two days of not seeing it, Jane asked Marge.

"I wish she would get one. For companionship, but for protection too."

Marge developed the theory that Alec Leahy had been the victim of foul play. And if he had, who was to say what spouse would be next?

"Jim thinks he just took off. He knows the statistics. Some awful percentage of men abandon their families."

The two women fell silent, as if they too were vulnerable. Jane found that she no longer wanted to talk about Mrs. Leahy. It wasn't that her curiosity waned. Far from it. It had become an obsession and she did not want to share it. Mrs. Leahy gave life to all those dreadful statistics one read. Jane shivered as she thought of herself suddenly left alone, not knowing where Jim had gone, abandoned, rejected. Her heart went out to Mrs. Leahy.

And to her dog.

She imagined Mrs. Leahy being afraid for her dog, now that her husband was gone. That was why she never let it out of the house. Watch as Jane would, there was no sign of a pet—except for the regular purchase of pet food. Once a week, Mrs. Leahy wheeled half a cart of pet food from the supermarket, waving off any help, putting it in the trunk of her car herself.

When she got home, she would carry the bag from the garage, set it down, and take a key from her purse and let herself into her house. Then one day she opened her purse and rummaged around in it, then, opening it wider, held it so she could look inside, an annoyed expression on her face. Finally, she stood for a moment, then stooped and took a key from under the doormat. Jane developed the thought that she left the key there in case her husband returned. It added to the poignancy of Mrs. Leahy's plight—until she found that Marge too kept a key under her back doormat.

"We came home once too often thinking the other had a key. Did you ever squeeze through a basement window in a good dress?"

Jane laughed. "No."

"Neither did I. I took it off first."

"Why didn't your husband go in the window?"

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Marge tipped her head and looked at Jane over her glasses. "He wouldn't get halfway through stark naked."

The night-light, the dog, the closed-up house—they didn't go with a key under the mat, unless of course you thought of the key as waiting there for the husband if he ever returned. The thought of the key hidden there when Mrs. Leahy went out on her errands became the focus of Jane's obsession. The invisible dog seemed almost as mysterious as the absent husband, and she told herself she had to see it. Pretending to weed the lawn, getting close to the Leahy house and listening for any sound of the pet drew no clue. Finally, on her knees, wearing a sunhat, armed with a little spade, she crept right up next to the Leahy house. The basement windows were shut. But suddenly she heard something. A mewling, whining sound. She cocked her ear to make sure, but whatever she had heard was drowned out by the sound of traffic. She stayed where she was, waiting for silence, but before it came she heard Mrs. Leahy turn into her drive and she scurried back to her own yard.

She wanted to tell Jim that there was indeed a dog next door, in the basement, but she bit her tongue and said nothing. Jim was no longer patient with her curiosity about their neighbor. Besides, Jane had the odd desire to keep the knowledge secret. A plan had formed in her mind. The next time Mrs. Leahy went shopping, Jane was going to take the key and let herself into the house and solve at least the mystery of the dog.

With days to go before she would have the opportunity, she could imagine it was just a crazy notion, not one she would act on when the time came. It was certainly nothing she could mention to Jim. Inside her head, a debate raged, her different selves arguing the pros and cons of going into the house next door. The compelling reason was to rid herself of this obsession with Mrs. Leahy. Once she had been inside and seen the dog, she would be able to turn her mind to other things. Even so, she found it hard to believe she would actually break into someone else's house.

Her excuse, she decided, should she be discovered, would be that she had heard the dog whining and gone to check it out. How had she opened the door? But no one would find out. She would not stay that long.

Mrs. Leahy's shopping day came and Jane sat at her window waiting for her neighbor to drive off. The morning passed in glacial slowness, noontime came and went; there was no sign of

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life in the house next door, let alone of an impending shopping trip. At one o'clock it was all Jane could do not to pick up the phone and call Mrs. Leahy. Any excuse would do. She actually had the phone in her hand when she heard a garage door slide up and then Mrs. Leahy came outside. Jane could have cheered. But then her heart was in her throat. Would she dare to enter the house next door? She still had her hand on the phone after Mrs. Leahy drove off. She picked it up and dialed the Leahy number and listened to the ring. Her idea was to disturb the dog before she went over there.

She wore her sunhat and gardening gloves when she walked rapidly across the yard to the Leahy house. She stooped and lifted the mat. There was the key. She slipped off her glove and picked it up. Her hand was trembling when she fitted it into the lock. She turned it and pushed. The door did not give easily, but soon she was inside. She left the door open. Each step into the house seemed a more definite invasion of another's privacy. She stopped and listened. There was no sound.

She whistled.

A thin, unmusical sound. She whistled again. She stood motionless with puckered lips and then she heard it. The low mewling sound. It came from the basement. Was the dog kept locked up down there? The little surge of indignation enabled her to go to the basement stairway. She whistled again. From below came an odd, almost gleeful sound. Jane rapidly descended the stairs.

Halfway down she stopped. Had a car driven in? It had to be her imagination. She was too close now to stop. She would see Mrs. Leahy's dog no matter what.

The basement was dark. She should have turned on the light. She moved toward the rustling sound, her heart in her throat. Something brushed against her cheek and she cried out. As she slapped at it with her hand she realized it was a string. A light cord. She pulled it. The light went on and then she saw him.

He was bearded and his matted hair hung to his shoulders. He had raised a hand against the dim glare from the light. Then he began to jump up and down, throwing himself against the bars of the cage. When his hand dropped his mouth was open and he made an impassioned inarticulate sound. His mouth seemed odd and then she realized he had no tongue.

Upstairs, the back door closed. The man cringed and crept to the

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back of his cage. Jane found that she could not move. There was the sound of descending footsteps on the basement stairs.

In the checkout line at the supermarket Marge was discussing poor Jane.

"I blame myself, Fran. I fed her curiosity. I should have known it wasn't a healthy interest."

"She didn't even leave a note?"

"Did Mr. Leahy leave a note?"

"You think she just left?"

"She's gone." Marge gave Fran her full attention. "She was fascinated by the story of his disappearance. She couldn't hear enough about it."

"What does her husband say?"

"The poor man. He thinks she may be somewhere close by, in hiding, but intending to show up some day. He told the police of some story they'd talked about."

Fran shook her head in disbelief. "Where do you think she may have gone?"

"God only knows."

Ahead of them, the clerk was pulling cans across the bar-code reader. Pet food of some kind. Marge turned and gripped Fran's arm and said in a strained whisper, "Good grief, I hope she didn't hear us."

"Who?"

"Mrs. Leahy."

Marge mouthed the words. They held back, and then she and Fran watched the tragic figure of Mrs. Leahy push her groceries outside to her car. ●

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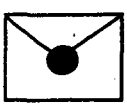

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A Gift of Murder

by William Bankier

So few years left to live. I might have made it to the end peacefully. But then I saw Dana Mell tending bar in The Salty Dog on Pacific Coast Highway.

She came to ask me what I wanted to drink. In that moment, I was transported back to Baytown, to the high-school gymnasium during a Friday-night dance. And there was Betty Culligan, sixteen years old, like me, with delight and mischief shining in her eyes.

"Let's try bourbon and water," I said.

"Let's do that," she agreed, snatching a bowl of peanuts from along the bar and sliding it in front of me.

It takes extraordinary skill to switch from one locale to another in the space of a single short story. Bill Bankier does so frequently in his Baytown tales, often moving the action from an America city to a heartland Canadian town. As one critic said, "He crams so many interesting characters and plot twists into his short stories that one wishes he would occasionally permit himself the...fuller development [of]...a novel." †

After she served me and I paid her, I said, "I didn't see you when I was in here before."

"When was that?"

"I guess it was Tuesday night."

"I used to work days. Carney switched me to the evening shift." She glanced at the blond surfer who was loading bottles of beer into a cold cabinet. He noticed we were talking about him and gave us an on-off grin.

Her hair was auburn, parted in the middle, most of it drawn back and fastened behind her head, which was large and square. She wore makeup like a forties film star, lipstick and rouge, but it

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was not garish on her, she looked good. The main thing was those green eyes, which met mine and held. She told me her name and put out her hand.

"Hello, Dana, I'm James Thatcher." The handshake sealed it. All those years ago, when Betty Culligan met me for the first time, we shook hands. This was the same firm grasp. "You remind me of a girl I knew in Canada."

"Where in Canada?"

"Ontario. A place called Baytown."

"I'm from Canada. Winnipeg."

For the next hour and a half I watched her work. Her charm was not restricted to me; every customer she served received a breezy welcome. The regulars got more. I felt jealous at first, as if my greeting had been devalued. But she was only doing her job, and besides, we were fellow Canadians. And she looked like Betty Culligan.

I left the bar at ten, climbed into my car, and headed home. Yes, I was driving under the influence. There are not sufficient cops in California to keep us off the road. I checked in the mirror for follow-home bandits who might rob and kill me. Not tonight.

I parked on the street near the building. When I went inside my apartment, the telephone was ringing. I let it ring, waiting for my answering machine to reveal the caller's identity.

There were furnishings in that room from the old house on Field Street. I left home in my twenties to take a reporting job on the *Toronto Star*. My brother Ben remained in charge. I flew home only for parental funerals. When Ben died, with neither of us married, I paid movers to crate the things I wanted and ship them to Vancouver, where I was living by that time. As the telephone stopped ringing, I sat on the arm of my mother's recliner chair and looked at myself in the oak-framed mirror that used to hang in the dining room.

The machine kicked in. "This is Dana from the bar. Do you always drive without a license?"

I picked up the phone. "Hello, it's me."

"You dropped your wallet on the floor. It was under the stool where you were sitting."

I patted my empty pocket. "You are wonderful, Dana. I'll drive back and get it."

"Don't do it. If the police stop you, it could be a hassle. I saw the way you walked out of here."

"What time do you open tomorrow?"

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"I get off work in an hour. I can bring it to you. This is your address?" She read from the ID in the wallet. "I'll put it through your letter slot."

"I'll be up. I'll make coffee."

Dana said, "What a nice place. You must be rich." We were at opposite ends of the kitchen table, drinking coffee and eating chocolate pudding from plastic cups.

"My brother left me some money when he died. It's made me a little bit independent. But I'm still a working stiff."

"Doing what?"

"I used to be a journalist. Began on the local paper in Baytown when I was a kid out of school. Worked in Toronto. Worked in Vancouver. When Ben died, I came down here." I was scraping pudding with my spoon. "Now I'm selling advertising space for the *Beverly Hills Courier.*"

"Good job?"

"I hate it. But it's tough finding work when you're fifty-five."

She seemed restless, turning her head, shifting on the chair, looking at the door. I talked about anything, trying to keep her there because she looked like Betty Culligan. I am usually asleep by ten-thirty and here I was, brimming with energy after midnight. I told her I had never taken a wife, neither had my brother Ben. "Thatchers seldom marry," I concluded.

"I have to get going," she said. She stood up, shouldering her bag. I followed her to the door. In my fantasy, she would have wanted to be kissed. But this young woman moved quickly outside onto the front step. She turned to wave and whispered, "Thanks for the coffee!" The last I saw of her was a flash of streetlight on auburn hair as she hurried to wherever her car was parked.

It was morning and I was showered, shaved, and ready to go to work before I inventoried the contents of my wallet. There was one credit card missing, my Visa. I telephoned The Salty Dog and spoke to a man—probably Carney. I said nothing about my card, but learned that Dana Mell would be there after four o'clock.

The plastic card could not have fallen out. They were all enclosed in glassine sleeves. It appeared that Dana was a thief. And a barefaced thief at that. I thought of Betty Culligan, whose ways were more subtle.

As teenagers, very much in love, we experimented with sex. She was more adventuresome than I, able to arrange time when her

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parents were not at home. I was a willing partner. Months later, she informed me she had missed her period.

We began talking about marriage, she with enthusiasm, I like a guilty soldier required to face a firing squad. We were seventeen years old. Both of us were choir members at St. Thomas's Church. For some reason, we decided to tell, not our parents, but Reverend Carter. It was a Sunday night after evensong. We intended to ask him to publish the banns of marriage.

During the service, Betty gave me a certain smile across the space between altos and tenors. In the vestry following the service, she whispered that the situation had changed, she was no longer pregnant, we need say nothing to the minister.

We never did get married. With the passage of time, I came to believe that Betty had been testing me. She wanted to see if I was a man. How would I face the responsibility of fatherhood? By revealing what a sleepwalker I was, what a nervous child, I failed the test.

As for me, I've been running from women ever since. Perhaps some men are destined never to be husbands. Nature may have decided, and rightly, that a mother and child deserve something more.

I put in a fairly successful day on behalf of the *Beverly Hills Courier*. I persuaded Adolfo to renew his contract for the restaurant on Canon Drive. And I sold a full page to European Motors marking the arrival of their new line of chariots. Then it was time to telephone Dana.

"It's me. I noticed the missing Visa card."

"I knew you would."

"Well?"

"You'd never understand."

"Try me."

She sounded subdued. "You don't know what it's like. I need clothes. I don't make much money here. I have to pay rent. I drive an old car and there's always something to fix on it."

"I understand perfectly." I felt secure. The situation put me comfortably in charge. "Dana, buy the clothes you need. You deserve to look nice."

"You mean it?"

"Save the sales slips and bring them to me. So I can compare them when they send me my bill."

"Wow, Jimmy!"

"I am never Jimmy. I'm always James."

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"James! James!"

"I bet you thought I'd call the cops."

Her reply surprised me. It was mocking, but it implied intimacy. "Thatchers seldom call the cops," she said.

I gave her three days. Then, on the third night, I drove to The Salty Dog. It was one of their talent evenings and the place was crowded. People will leave their television programs to come and watch other people make fools of themselves. Dana approached me wearing a smart new blouse with the collar turned up. She set down a sheaf of credit card slips and a glass of bourbon. "On the house," she said.

"Cheers." I took a sip; it was not the good stuff, it was the bar brand. "You look spiffy."

"Thanks to you, James."

"Let's inspect the damage." I perused the slips in dim light. The signatures were a good approximation of my own, copied from the sample on the back of the card. I saw the names of trendy shops. Some of them sold menswear. I spotted a sports jacket listed, and neckties. I raised my head and she knew what to say.

"Carney had to come along and sign. I could hardly pretend to be James Thatcher."

"I only meant *you* could buy clothes."

"I did. I bought some for Carney." She kept a straight face, then she grinned in such a way that I had to smile back at her.

Shuffling the slips, I did an approximate total in my head. "Nine hundred and eighty dollars," I murmured.

"Too much?"

"The card can carry it. I'd better have it back."

"Carney has it. Could you ask him, please? I'm so busy."

The owner was not in sight. I was feeling badly used, with the credit-card debits in my pocket and the taste of cheap bourbon in my mouth. I drifted past crowded tables to the far end of the bar. Carney was not there, but I saw a slice of light where the door to the back office hung ajar. With every right to do so, I went to that door and pushed it open. The surfer was seated at a desk covered with invoices and the *Daily Racing Form*. He glanced up, recognized me, gave me one of the company grins.

"Come on in, mate. Want to buy a bar? I'll sell you this place, cheap."

"I've come for my Visa card."

"Can't give you that, old son."

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I realized for the first time that Carney was a Brit. It explained the pub atmosphere and the perpetual fish-and-chips on the menu. "Why can't you? It's my card."

"I'm not finished with it yet. Still got a few things I have to get."

"Then I'll just call the police."

"No, James, you'll never do that. And I'll tell you why. You gave your card freely to Dana Mell. For services rendered, if you take my meaning. You're a lecherous old geezer, James. You're devious. You had your way with my wife, without so much as a by-your-leave. The very least you could do is compensate her with a few purchases on your card. And now you want to renege on the deal. I think you're a molester, James. A perpetrator of sexual harassments. These are popular charges in California courtrooms. If I were you, I'd tread very carefully."

I was rendered silent by his attack. He was obviously prepared for me. He could persuade many a policeman with his story, especially if Dana backed him up. "One thing I can do," I said weakly. "Call the 800 number and cancel that card."

"Be a sport," Carney said. "Giz a couple more days. And now, good night and drive safely."

I went outside and stood in the parking lot. Usually, I take some time to enjoy the smell and sound of the Pacific. Tonight, I was scarcely aware of it. Cars raced past on the Pacific Coast Highway. I felt battered.

Dana was beside me, her hand on my sleeve. By moonlight, I looked into the pained expression on her face. I had trouble believing it was sincere. She asked me, "Did he threaten you?"

"He said wife."

"We were married almost a year ago. It was a mistake. I'm gone as soon as I can get the money."

I had to laugh. "Dana, that's brilliant. You've conned me out of a thousand dollars' worth of clothes. Now you're trying for plane fare."

"No! James, no!" She flashed what looked like genuine anger. "It isn't like that."

"Have it your way." I unlocked the door of my car.

"You're never coming back, are you? I don't blame you. Let me come to the house tonight. After I finish work. I have to talk to you."

I stared at her, recognizing her inner strength, her determination. "All right," I said.

She stood on tiptoe and gave me a kiss on the lips. It was

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exactly what Betty Culligan had done outside the gymnasium on that Friday night after the dance. But Betty had pennies in her loafers.

They arrived almost together, Dana and Carney. She was first, by about three minutes. Her pounding shook my front door. I ran to let her in. "I'm sorry, James. I couldn't stop him."

"Carney?"

"He'll be here any second. He made me tell him where I was going." She showed me her arm. There was a long red mark on it, as if it had been twisted.

I picked up the telephone.

"Don't call the police. He'll say I'm his wife and I'm fooling around with you." She was fumbling inside her shoulder bag.

"I can't fight him."

"Take this." She offered me a gun. It was a revolver; I could see the tips of bullets. "You won't have to use it. Threaten him, he'll go away."

A car raced past outside, brakes squealed, the driver backed up and switched off. We listened to the slam of a door; then marching footsteps on the front walk. Dana went to the door and flung it open in time for Carney to proceed inside without breaking stride.

"It was her idea to come here." I was holding the gun along the leg of my trousers, pointing down.

"Try to understand, James. I'm keeping two things. Your credit card, for about a week. And my wife, forever."

"I don't want any trouble."

He laughed at my timidity. "Is it your belief that you can have a life and not have trouble?" He looked at his hands, both sides, the fingers splayed. Then he made fists. "I'm going to provide some trouble for you, James. So you'll be like everybody else."

I raised the gun. The muzzle looked him in the eye. He stopped like a frame of film in a jammed projector. I said, "I'm the gentlest of men, Carney. But I absolutely refuse to be hit. If I have to kill you, I will."

He gave it a moment's thought. Then he said, "You convinced me. Dana, let's get out of here."

"I'm not going anyplace with you."

"See, James? Show some backbone and the lady falls into your arms."

"Hand over my credit card."

"You won't shoot me over plastic."

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"Your three minutes are up," Dana said. "You're beginning to bore me."

The door was still open. Carney went outside and stood on the front walk. "Did you hear what she said, James? Don't bore this woman. Not ever."

We watched his car go around the corner and out of sight. Then I closed the door and led the way back to the kitchen. Dana took the gun out of my hand and stowed it in her bag. I poured coffee and we carried our cups into the living room.

She paused and picked up a framed photograph of me on a horse. "Is this you?"

"Six years old. A summer afternoon in Baytown. A man came down the street with the horse and a camera. My brother Ben had his done too."

"You refer to your brother quite often."

"Ben was a good guy. We spent all our time together. We slept in the same bed until we were ten."

"How did he die?"

"He killed himself." I had never told anybody; now I was revealing the secret to Dana Mell. It was all right for her to know because I would have discussed it with Betty Culligan had I gone on living in Baytown. "He was diagnosed with cancer and he decided to skip the pain. Do you want to hear how he did it?"

"If you want to tell me."

"He called the local radio station, CBAY, and requested a piece he liked. The deejay agreed to play it in the quarter-hour before midnight. That night, he got in his car inside the closed-up garage with a glass and a bottle of good wine. He switched on the engine and let it idle. And he drank the wine and listened to his request on the radio. And he went unconscious. And he died."

After a few moments, Dana asked, "What was his request?"

"It's a long piece, with a string orchestra and dramatic narration. It's called 'Manhattan Tower.' "

Dana went into the kitchen and came back with the coffeepot. As she refilled my cup, she said, "I have to tell you something. I said I'm from Winnipeg, but I'm not. I was born in Los Angeles."

"Why did you lie to me?"

"It's a thing we do. Make a connection with the customer, sometimes you get a better tip. It sounds crass."

"I can understand it." I stared at her, looking for something different. She was just Dana. "What part of Los Angeles?"

"The Valley. Reseda. I'd lie about my origins in any case."

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"Why?"

"I had a crummy childhood. I was adopted, but I didn't find that out until I was grown up. My father was what they used to call a swinger. He wanted my mother to have babies and stay home and cook his meals when he showed up. But she could never get pregnant. And she was getting antsy about his lifestyle."

"How do you know this?"

"Relatives told me, after I grew up and left home. He pushed the adoption because he figured a baby would keep her quiet. But she never liked me. And he was hardly ever around. When he did show up, he was too close."

I felt I was watching a Sally Jessy show. "He abused you?"

"I hardly remember; I think he did. Anyway, when I was sixteen, I took off. I lived on the streets in Hollywood for a while. They kept bringing me back and I'd leave again." She took a moody sip of coffee. "It's a sad tale." Then she made an effort to brighten up. "You told me Ben looked after you in his will."

"He had insurance. I was the sole beneficiary. Plus the old family house on Field Street. He signed his share of it over to me as well."

"You're lucky." She sounded wistful. "You've got something to fall back on if you get tired of L.A."

"I'm considering it. There's an old couple living there, renting month to month. If they need time I could stay in the spare room until they're ready to move." It was sounding like an excellent idea. "I could leave tomorrow."

For the next few weeks, I steered clear of The Salty Dog. Dana's story, true or not, made me feel like avoiding her. My Visa card arrived in the mail, so I had no further business with Carney. When my next bill was delivered, I was pleasantly surprised. He had gone easy, spending only another couple of hundred.

Dana Mell had done two things for me. She reminded me of Betty Culligan, which was good for my dreams. And she had resurrected the idea of my moving back to Baytown. The decision was made easy. My employer informed me that the free weekly paper was going out of business after two more issues.

There was no persuasive reason to remain in California. I wrote a letter to Ben's tenants at the Field Street address. I explained my situation and asked whether they could make other arrangements. A reply arrived by return mail. Their daughter in the nearby town of Napanee had been after them to come and stay

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with her. Since they had taken the house furnished, paying rent into an account in Ben's bank, they had only to pack clothes and personal effects and go. They would vacate by the end of the month.

My own departure was only slightly more complicated. I had to sell or give away some furniture and fittings. This done, I packed my suitcases and a few boxes and prepared to drive across the USA to Detroit. There, I would cross over to Windsor and continue along the top of the lakes, past Toronto to Baytown.

The idea of looking in on Dana and saying goodbye occurred to me only at the last minute. The pub was out of my way, but I decided to do it. I worked the traffic along Sunset Boulevard to the coast and made my way to the oceanside location.

My heart was pounding as I went inside. What if Carney gave me a hard time? What if Dana snubbed me? It was ten-thirty in the morning, the place seemed deserted. When I called "Hello!", a young man appeared through a back doorway pushing a carpet-cleaning machine. "I'm looking for Carney, the owner."

"I'm the owner. Carney has moved on." He parked the machine and gave me a look.

"His wife, too?"

"I never saw any wife." The man wiped his forehead with a wristband. "Are you going to be seeing Carney?"

"I doubt it."

"If you do, tell him he forgot to mention a couple of things. Like the leak in the roof. And the rats that come in at night from the beach. I guess it explains why I got such a good price."

I enjoyed my drive home, a seven-day journey. The month was September. It was a good time to arrive back in southern Ontario. The last hundred miles flowed swiftly under a cobalt sky. Leaves were beginning to turn. I rolled into town across the north bridge and followed a familiar route to the house on Field Street.

I pulled into the driveway, switched off, and sat for a while, breathing honeysuckle air, feeling the tingle in legs tired from driving.

That was when Dana opened the front door and ran to the car. "I knew you'd come," she said. She was dressed in neat jeans and a tight white tennis shirt. She had put on some weight.

I was surprised to see her, but the feeling did not last long. "Is Carney with you?"

"Not exactly. We'd better go inside."

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My old home looked much like the last time I stood in it. Predictably, the rooms appeared smaller. I followed Dana into the kitchen and collapsed on a chair. "Can I get you something?" She opened the refrigerator door. Her juice was there, her eggs, her margarine, her jars of olives and pickles. "You must be hungry."

"I ate an hour ago. I expected the place to be empty."

She closed the refrigerator and stood with her back to the door. She made a tent of her hands and touched fingertips to her lips. "James, I took a liberty moving in. I've been here for a few weeks. I had to go somewhere, the way things were between me and Carney. I expected your tenants would let me stay in the spare room you mentioned. But when I got here, they were moving out. So I acted fast."

"I've noticed that about you."

"I said you'd sent me to house-sit until you got here." She brought a plastic bag of washed radishes to the table and sat down. They were the size of small apples, dull purple with white ends. She bit into one. "And here you are."

"Carney is the one I'm worried about."

"You don't have to concern yourself about Carney."

"You, Dana, I've figured out. You're a con artist, an opportunist, but you're not dangerous. And you have a decent side. But I believe Carney might hurt me."

"You'd better come outside." She got to her feet and moved to the back door. "Come into the garden."

"None of this would be happening," I said, "if you didn't look like Betty Culligan."

"I know. I remembered you telling me about her." Dana took a makeup mirror out of her handbag and examined her face. "Your dreams of Betty bear no resemblance to how things really are."

"I know that."

"She's in her fifties, same as you."

"Be quiet."

"You wouldn't like looking at her the way she turned out."

"How do you know?"

"I'm guessing." She put the mirror away. "Let's go outside." Then she remembered something. "Look what I found!" She left the room and came back with a framed photograph. It was of Ben seated on the palomino horse in our laneway. I took the picture and stared at it. Ben was holding the reins lightly in one hand. The other hand was raised, finger pointing as if it were a gun.

"Imagine your remembering this."

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She put her face close to mine and we looked at Ben together. "I'm the best thing that ever happened to you, James," she said. And then, "Now let's check out the garden."

She led me across the back lawn to a broad area of flowers designed and planted by my father. There was a rising terrace of soil and rock on either side with clusters of pansies, marigolds, petunias, and baby's-breath. In the center were azalea, hydrangea, peonies, and, bordering the back fence, a bank of rhododendron. Purple and yellow iris lined the front edge of the display, and here was where Dana drew my attention.

"There's who you're afraid of," she said. "There's our friend Carney." She indicated an area of turned earth, about six feet long and a foot and a half wide. Already, small weeds and tufts of grass had begun to cover the surface.

My first reaction was a sense of relief. I would not have to confront my enemy. Then I saw the practical side. "You can't just murder somebody and bury him in my garden!"

"It's been three weeks. Carney had no family. He was a loner. The pub in Los Angeles drove him crazy. He bought it with drug money. You didn't know he was a dealer? Take my word for it, he's done every crime in the book. I tried to escape him by coming here. When he showed up, I had no choice. I shot him the first night, while he was asleep."

"You can't fire a gun in Baytown in the middle of the night. The neighbors would be out on the street."

"I'm not a fool." She led me away from the grave. "I'm afraid the muzzle blast wrecked one of your pillows."

In the days that followed, I stuck close to home. I was keeping an eye on Dana Mell, I suppose. I knew I was right about her. She was a con, a manipulator. And apparently, though hard to accept, a murderer. But she was useful to have around, a chatty companion, and not a bad cook. So I made excuses for her. Coming off a nasty childhood, the girl was trying to survive in a hostile world. She did what she had to do, told what lies were necessary to get along. Carney had it coming to him. And now that his evil influence had been eliminated, maybe we could have a life together.

Then I ran across an article in the *Baytown Banner*. It dealt with the disappearance almost a month ago of Betty Culligan. Headline and subhead told the story. "NO CLUES IN CULLIGAN DISAPPEARANCE. Burn Victim May Have Taken Her Own Life."

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It was difficult reading. Apparently my old girlfriend had gone missing. Her car was found abandoned on a country road across the bay. There were no signs of a struggle. Suicide was suspected although no note had been found. Friends spoke of Culligan's depression following the serious facial burns she suffered when a pan of cooking oil burst into flames in the kitchen of her cottage on Station Road. Plastic surgery had been marginally successful in reducing the scars. The theory was that she might have drowned herself; the body could surface eventually.

Dana was making a salad. When I sat back from reading, she said, "You had to find out sooner or later. I saw how she looked. It's better you remember her the way she was."

On the following night, I was sleeping fitfully. I was still not accustomed to my brother's bed. It had seemed churlish to shift Dana out of the master bedroom when her stuff was unpacked and stowed in there. I was awakened by the sound of voices speaking in subdued tones. They were in the kitchen. I could not make out what they were saying until I crept out of bed and moved to the head of the stairs.

"You're the best mule I ever worked with." It was Carney! "Remember when you came through San Ysidro on a bus? You had six kilos in your luggage and they never even searched! You were magic."

"I'm not going back. Forget it. Get somebody else to smuggle your cocaine."

"I'll increase your share. How about another five percent? And a better supply for your own use."

"I've kicked it, Carney. Don't laugh at me. I have. I'm living here now, with James, in this house. It's a whole new life." Her voice hardened. "And you're not in it."

"That old geezer? What can he give you? I could have you back tomorrow."

"It's what I can give him. I'm going to protect him."

"You're the one who needs protection."

"Don't mess with me, Carney. I still have the gun. I've killed once since I came here, so James could keep the good things inside his head. He's a man with lovely memories. You and I wouldn't know."

I left the landing, went back into my room. I eased back onto the bed and lay there, breathing hard. If Carney was not buried in my back garden, it could only be one other person: Betty Culligan.

Dana must have come across Betty somewhere, probably looked

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her up out of curiosity. Seeing the scarred face, she made a desperate decision. Betty had to be dead and buried so that I would never see her. Dana may have been protecting me, as she told Carney. Or she may have felt I would begin devoting myself to my old love, out of loyalty. That would be competition, and Dana hates competition.

She probably telephoned Betty, invited her to the house on some pretext, rendered her unconscious somehow. Then she shot her through a pillow—that part of the story was true. After she buried the body, she took Betty's car to the lonely road across the bay. It was a five-mile walk back, but Dana could do that easily after dark.

I must go to the police first thing in the morning. But I have the rest of the night to consider the alternative. If Carney leaves us alone, I could settle in with Dana and make the best of it. Not a bad deal; she looks like Betty Culligan, only twenty years younger.

I'm drifting now, half unconscious. It sounds like Dana and Carney have turned in. I hear them in my room along the hall. Some conversation, then silence.

I must have slept. The sound that woke me was a muffled report. It's how I would imagine the sound of a pistol fired into a pillow. This is followed by the creak of footsteps on the stairs. My front door opens and closes, a car starts up and drives away.

I am experiencing a very bad feeling. I hurry down the hall and enter my bedroom. I pick up the scorched pillow and look at the ruined face of . . . Dana Mell!

It seems late to call in the police. They'll ask how long have I known about Betty Culligan's body in my garden. And who is this murdered woman in my bed? Hard to blame Carney because I don't know where he's gone. I'm not even sure that's his name.

Dana's deception has worked this long. Perhaps I should go on with it. I still have a couple of hours of darkness before the sun comes up. Time enough to dig another shallow grave.

But I'm an accessory after the fact to two murders now, not just one. And we must pay for our transgressions in the end. So I can go to the police, or I can wait for Carney to name the price.

When he returns, Carney will not hurt me. He knows what an easy mark I am. And Dana said he had committed every crime in the book. Why not blackmail? ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

SIGRID'S PAJAMAS

by Steven Gulvezan

"He's scum, real scum, but I took the job anyway, for little Sigrid and you," Roscoe said, a hurt look on his face when he confronted his wife at the front door. He closed the door and, showing remarkable delicacy for such a large and powerful man, carefully placed the little pile of children's books he'd authored on the table, making an infinitesimal adjustment to the symmetry of the stack.

"Don't do anything you're not comfortable with," June said, neither offering nor expecting any welcoming touch or embrace, for Roscoe was not that kind of man.

"Nonsense. It's my duty to provide for my family. If I've failed . . . if a temporary writer's block is preventing me from writing a new book of my own," he said as he flicked a speck of dust off the bright cover of *Harold Does His Homework*, "I'll do it any way I can. As it is, I guess I'm lucky to get the job. There were plenty of other applicants. He said he liked my style, which I guess refers to my writing. If it means lowering myself to the standards of a filthy pornographer—a pig in a barnyard—so be it."

"Roscoe, as long as I've got my job—" June began.

Michigan's Steven Gulvezan makes his living as the director of a suburban Detroit public library, and, as he tells us, libraries played an important role in his decision to become a writer. It was a library copy of Ray Bradbury's *The Illustrated Man*, found while browsing one day when he was twelve, that sparked his love of fiction. We congratulate him on a fine debut.

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"Do you think I want my wife cleaning toilets at a racetrack?" Roscoe said through clenched teeth.

"But it pays so much better than your writing. And it's got benefits and . . ."

With a withering look Roscoe cut June dead. "He wants me to help him research his new novel. We'll be leaving for Quebec City on Monday. He wants me to take notes on local color and also notes on *him* and his interactions with the people we encounter. He said his research includes 'acting out' certain situations he wants to write about."

"That sounds kind of weird. Are you sure—"

He held up a hand to silence her. "From this day on, I am a research assistant for Lyle Talbot."

Roscoe sighed and June, nervously trying to get wispy strands of her light brown hair back into her barrette, felt herself being sucked in by his frustration. She would have liked to reach out to him in some way but Roscoe discouraged displays of emotion. Sometimes she wondered how they had managed to conceive Sigrid. And as she thought of Sigrid, almost as though he were reading her thoughts, the shadow lifted from Roscoe's face. "Where's my baby?" he said.

"Sigrid's in the family room, watching TV."

"I hope it's not trash." Roscoe brushed past her to reach his daughter.

"Daddy's home!" he said as he eyed the TV screen. Sigrid smiled at him and he bent over to give her a peck on the forehead. It was an educational program. It was okay.

Roscoe was waiting on his porch early Monday morning when Lyle Talbot parked his car in the driveway. "I could have picked *you* up," Roscoe said. His body, big and solid as a defensive lineman's, blocked the entrance to the house.

"Nonsense. You live closer to the airport than I do." Lyle said. "Do you mind if I step in?"

Roscoe indicated his suitcase. "I'm ready to leave," he pointed out.

"Relax, there's plenty of time, and I'd really like a drink of water."

Reluctantly Roscoe opened the door and Lyle, spotting June, held out his hand and smiled. "You must be Mrs. Wright."

June gave him her hand. "Yes. I've seen your books, but I'm afraid I've never read any of them."

Lyle held June's hand for a second too long. "Perhaps that's just as well," he said. He laughed infectiously, making June smile.

"And who are you?" he asked as Sigrid, still in her pajamas, turned the corner.

"I'm Sigrid."

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Before she had the words out Lyle had picked her up in his arms. Sigrid didn't seem to mind. In fact, she giggled. Roscoe looked on apprehensively. "Who's your friend?" Lyle said, looking at the doll Sigrid held.

"Baby Sarah. She's my best friend."

Lyle gave Sigrid a big kiss on the cheek. "Can I be your friend too?" he said.

"Yes." Sigrid laughed as Lyle swooped her down. "You can be my friend."

"Your daughter is the sweetest thing," Lyle said to Roscoe, as they flew at 30,000 feet somewhere over the Great Plains.

"Yes," Roscoe said. His face blanched and he looked past Lyle out the window.

They checked into a bed and breakfast in Quebec City. While Lyle went for a walk, Roscoe, ever mindful of what he was being paid for, studied their fellow lodgers, but aside from overheard bits and pieces of spousal quarrels there didn't seem to be much that was interesting about them. That evening as Roscoe was looking over his notes Lyle knocked on his door.

"Ready for dinner?" Always perky, always dapper in a chubby sort of way, Lyle examined Roscoe critically and, Roscoe thought, with a vague distaste. "You *are* wearing a tie, aren't you?"

Before Roscoe could reply Lyle said, "You'll have to have your notebook ready too. Remember the scene in *Coagulations of the Heart* in which Bob Brodsky gets beaten up after he makes the crack to the truck driver about the lace panties? I lived that scene. You said you have a prodigious memory, and I know from your children's books that you seem to be good at picking out salient details. In your scribbling I want facial expressions, nuances of speech, I want *reality*. Can you give me *reality?*"

"Certainly." Roscoe fumbled with his notebook and pen, looking at the notes he'd written about the architecture of the houses on the other side of the street.

As they walked along the boulevard, Lyle said, "How is your own writing progressing?"

Roscoe knew that question had to come sooner or later, but when it did his jaw still tightened and he saw himself battering his word processor until bits of his flesh lay entwined with the broken plastic of the keyboard.

"I've been taking a short break from my writing. That's why I applied for this job, to give myself a change of pace. Some people"—

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Roscoe cast a sidelong glance at Lyle—"think writing children's books is easy. But when you're trying to write quality, uplifting literature for children, I assure you, it is not easy at all." He was tempted to add, *unlike the writing of pornography,* but he bit his tongue, because, after all, Lyle was his employer, and *they*—June and sweet little Sigrid—needed the money so badly. "It is, in fact, more like pulling teeth."

"Kid's books? Like pulling teeth?" Lyle said in what Roscoe thought was a snide, condescending way. He felt his face burning when, after a pause, Lyle continued: "You *are* tightly wound, aren't you? So outwardly calm, and yet . . ." Lyle smiled to himself. "Me, I'm never blocked. I get ideas all the time. It seems as though I just pull them out of the air." And, as if to illustrate, Lyle made an unexpected snatching motion, which made Roscoe jump and Lyle laugh. It seemed as though he really had caught something. "If I get stuck on one project I simply turn to another."

From Roscoe's point of view, the evening at the restaurant went poorly from the start. But perhaps this fiasco was just what Lyle wanted; perhaps this sick man was purposely trying to arrange the scene to fit some strange pattern in his imagination.

First, Lyle, who so far had seemed to be Mr. Personality, got into an argument with the waitress by speaking in unintelligible French and then accusing her of lying when she said she didn't understand him. After they'd eaten, he called for the check and when she brought it only curled it into a little ball and threw it on the floor. The waitress turned to leave but Lyle took her by the arm, shouted "Where do you think you're going?" and maintained his grip until the bartender was forced to intervene. Who knew what might have happened if first Lyle's gaze, and then the bartender's, hadn't turned to Roscoe, large and powerful-looking even in a seated position. The bartender unclenched his fists.

"Dammit," Lyle said outside, "I wanted her to cry. In my novel Nick makes the waitress cry, then breaks down and cries himself. She forgives him and a bond is established. Perhaps I should have slapped her."

"Do you want us to end up in jail?" Roscoe said.

"Do you think it would have led to that?" Lyle replied, a quixotic smile spreading over his even features.

After two days in Quebec City Lyle decided he wanted to fly to New York to work on several scenes that were set there.

"Breathe that air!" Lyle said as he lingered on the street outside

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their hotel. "Garbage, exhaust, foulness! Make a note of it."

Just then what looked like a small family—father, mother, little girl—passed on the sidewalk. They were set off from the crowd by their attire. The man, bearded, wore a black, wide-brimmed hat, blue shirt, black pants, and suspenders; the woman and girl, long calico frocks and bonnets.

Lyle spotted them and took off after them. Roscoe followed.

Lyle took the man by the shoulder "Hey, buddy, are you pimping?"

"What? I don't know you." The man shrugged off Lyle's hand and began herding the woman and child away.

"Lyle," Roscoe said.

Lyle grabbed the man again and pointed at the little girl. "Street candy. What's the price?"

The man slugged Lyle in the mouth before Roscoe could step between them.

"Amish are supposed to be nonviolent!" Lyle objected, stunned. He put a hand to his bleeding mouth.

"Who said I'm Amish?" the man replied, trying without success to get around Roscoe and then, after looking into Roscoe's eyes and seeing two tiny blue time bombs set in that big, stolid face, taking his hands off Roscoe and moving back a step.

"But, your clothes, your beard, your hat—" Lyle said with a mush mouth.

"It' s a free country. I can dress any way I please."

It had been a good punch, and Roscoe watched with satisfaction as the blood welled up in Lyle's cut mouth. For once he was unable to frame any smart reply. But he soon recovered. "Verisimilitude," he mumbled as they checked in at the hotel. "Those Amish outfits were cute," he said in the elevator. "Your daughter—Sigrid—would look darling in a little dress and bonnet like that. You should buy her one. Now"—Lyle smiled painfully—"let's get cleaned up and go to dinner. Tell me, have you ever broken the crackling skin of a Peking Duck?"

"I've made up my mind," Lyle said as they rode a cab to Chinatown. "In the book, Nick's woman is going to be an Amish girl who runs away from her repressive home life to become a hooker in New York City. Her father will travel to New York to rescue her and, when Nick approaches them on the street, the father will assault him. See how it all works out? Isn't the creative process something?"

"To me, your process seems . . . unusual."

Lyle laughed, and then laughed again when, on the street outside

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the restaurant, a cheese wheel that was being unloaded from a truck slipped and hit Roscoe on the back of the head, knocking him unconscious.

Roscoe opened his eyes.

"Are you okay?" Lyle said, kneeling beside him.

Roscoe hesitated. "I felt like I was flying through the sky. It felt so good to be flying, so cool and free. Look at the stars," Roscoe lifted his finger to a sparkler in the raised hand of a street vendor.

They both looked and a young woman's head interposed between them and the vendor, sparks momentarily creating a dazzling corona around her head.

She looked down at Roscoe. She seemed concerned.

"An angel," Roscoe said.

"Hello," Lyle said.

The girl reminded Roscoe of an older version of Sigrid. Her *looks,* her *appearance,* that is. After that, all similarity ended. Afterwards Roscoe refused even to remember her name. He called her, with some inner satisfaction, the cheese girl.

For, you see, the cheese girl and Lyle hit it off immediately. Lyle asked her if she wanted to dine with them and all through the meal it was as if Roscoe didn't even exist. Lyle talked about his books and his writing, and the girl hung on his every word. Roscoe wanted to say, I'm a published writer too, I'm well-known and highly considered in some circles; but he said nothing and looked at his food, examining each piece of meat as he stabbed it with his fork.

"But she's so young . . ." Roscoe protested when the girl left them to go to the ladies room.

"And you, my dear boy," Lyle replied, "are so *old!"*

After dinner the threesome went to Lyle and Roscoe's hotel suite where Lyle and the girl shut themselves up in Lyle's room. All night long Roscoe sat in his adjoining room listening through the wall to every grunt and groan, every murmur and coo, silently condemning the descent of two human beings to the level of animals. It got so bad he wanted to scream.

Strangely, it never occurred to Roscoe to leave his overheated room and go for a walk or to a cafe. For some reason he felt riveted to the spot, compelled to sit and listen, and condemn and imagine.

When the hour came for his nightly telephone call to June he put it off, and put it off again. Under these circumstances, he just couldn't bear to hear her voice. And what if she put Sigrid on the phone?

But finally, though it was very late, he decided he had to call.

"You sound tired," June said.

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"It's . . . this research is hard work."

"What's the matter? Your voice sounds so strange."

"I think we'll be staying here a few more days. If you knew the—I believe this is going to drive me—Oh, never mind, June. Just a few more days. Please . . ." He was going to say, kiss little Sigrid for me, but couldn't bring himself to say his precious baby's name, and only said, "Goodbye," and hung up the phone.

Upon returning to Los Angeles, Roscoe insisted—although Lyle had his car in the parking garage—on taking a cab from the airport. Roscoe said he had business to take care of before he went home. However, the only place he stopped was a bar where he drank an enormous amount of liquor. It didn't make him drunk. When he arrived home June didn't even seem to notice anything different about him.

At the airport Roscoe had given Lyle his travel notes and accepted payment for the trip. Lyle said he didn't need Roscoe anymore right now because he was going into seclusion to write, but would call him if additional research was necessary.

Never effervescent, in the weeks following his return home Roscoe took to brooding in the basement, cutting and drilling things with his power tools, pounding and hammering and boring and sawing. When June asked him what he was making, he said, "A desk."

"For Sigrid?"

"For myself."

"But you've already got a desk."

"But I can't write at it, can I? I still can't write anything."

Roscoe decided the wood he already had wasn't suitable for his new desk and went to the lumberyard to buy oak. It was expensive and he couldn't afford it, but he bought it anyway. He hauled it down to the basement and set grimly to work. This would be a quality desk: no power tools, no nails, no screws. Pegs only, everything done by hand. Every surface would be perfectly straight or perfectly curved, as the project required.

Working on the desk, he thought about Lyle and the trip. He decided Lyle had hired him for reasons other than his talents as a research assistant. Lyle didn't really value his writing skills. Any fool could take notes. No, one of the reasons Lyle had hired him was for his size. Lyle wanted a bodyguard in case things got too rough during one of his simulated reality games. That reason, even though it was demeaning, could be swallowed.

It was the second hidden reason that tore Roscoe up inside. Lyle

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had been toying with him, putting different sorts of pressure on him, and then noting his responses. Lyle was planning to put a character based on him in one of his infernal novels. That's what Lyle meant when he said he "liked his style." Lyle had been looking for an upright, moral, responsible man whose emotions and character, whose *being* he could twist and turn and toy with and then observe like a bug under a magnifying glass. Thinking this, Roscoe hit his wood chisel a savage blow and put a notch in the wood.

Sigrid appeared at the top of the stairs. "Daddy, what are you doing?" she said. "Aren't you coming up for lunch?"

"No," he said, running his finger over the imperfection in the wood.

Since he'd returned, something about Sigrid, he didn't know precisely what, made him nervous. The more he analyzed Lyle and the trip and his family, the more his tools grew slick with sweat and the more tightly he gripped them.

Roscoe was sawing and it was crooked. He couldn't stay on the line. He looked at what he'd created and suddenly it seemed a mess.

June called from upstairs. Lyle was on the phone.

"Tell him I'm busy," Roscoe said.

"He says it's important."

Roscoe reluctantly climbed up from the basement and took the call. And then he reluctantly got in his car and drove to Lyle's apartment. He didn't bother to get cleaned up. What difference did it make if a man was clean or dirty on the outside? It was the cleanliness of the inner man that mattered.

He hated Lyle, so why was he going? He didn't know. Maybe, he thought sardonically, he could make some more easy money. Why not? He didn't have anything better to do.

Lyle lived in a posh condominium. He peered into Roscoe's eyes. "You look kind of pale. What have you been doing, living underground?"

"I've been working in my basement a lot lately."

"Do you want a drink?"

When Roscoe declined Lyle mixed one for himself. "I'm afraid the novel has been progressing a bit slowly and—But, oh, I forgot . . ." and he took a shopping bag off a bar stool and handed it to Roscoe. "I bought an Amish outfit for your daughter."

Roscoe accepted the bag.

"And . . ." Lyle looked at Roscoe, "I've decided to give you a bonus."

He took a folded check out of his pocket and gave it to Roscoe.

Roscoe held it in his hand without looking at it.

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Lyle lifted a manuscript off the bar. "You—you and your family and our experiences—especially something you said one night in New York—inspired me. The novel wasn't going well, so I decided to write a little book about your daughter. My publisher thinks it's terrific. They've scheduled it for rush publication. What I did was to take Sigrid and turn her into a—"

"My . . . *daughter?* You're writing about *my daughter!*"

With both hands Roscoe took Lyle by the throat and bent him backwards over the bar, digging his big thumbs into Lyle's trachea as he squeezed and squeezed.

"You bastard," he said, squeezing, *"you dirty rotten bastard, how dare you put my baby into your filthy pornography."*

Despite Roscoe's objections, June brought Sigrid to visit him in prison. He'd pled guilty immediately, no reasons or explanations given. "She misses you so," June said. "By not seeing her, you're punishing your daughter as well as yourself. Do you want to punish Sigrid?"

No, he did not want to punish Sigrid. He looked blankly at June like some great bull who's given up the fight and is standing dully in the center of the arena waiting for the final cut.

So June brought Sigrid and something in Sigrid's face shattered Roscoe's wall of numbness. It was the way she smiled at him, as if he wasn't really such a horrible man, but someone with some redeeming qualities, someone she cared about, someone—her father. He was still her father. For the first time in a long time he felt as though he had something to live for. His baby had saved him. He anticipated Sigrid's next visit. Sigrid's love, he thought, would heal him inside. And one day, a long way away, he would get out, and they would be together again.

Sigrid returned on a Thursday. June was busy that day so Roscoe's sister, Loretta, made the trip.

"I've got something for you, Daddy." Sigrid held up a paper bag. "I'm going to ask the guard to give it to you."

Roscoe looked at her adoringly through the glass. "What is it?"

Sigrid put down the paper bag and Roscoe noticed that she was also holding a children's book. Was it one of his? No. On the cover was a picture of a golden little girl flying through the air. The title was *Sigrid's Pajamas.* The author was Lyle Talbot.

"It's a pair of my pajamas, my pink pajamas, just like in the book. At night you can put them on and, just like the princess in the book, just like me, you can wish real hard and then you can fly through the sky and come home to us." ●

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TRADE WARS

by Brendan DuBois

New Hampshire native Brendan DuBois has been publishing mystery short stories for more than ten years. His combination of hardboiled themes and engrossing characterizations has earned him a place not only in *EQMM* but in magazines such as *Playboy* and in many year's-best anthologies. The author's novels *Dead Sand* and *Black Tide* are available as Pocket Books paperbacks. ✝

Just before he landed at Logan in Boston, Sam Cullen looked at the seat pocket before him and saw a crumpled-up peanut bag left from a previous flight. It figured. His flight had been late, the carpeting inside threadbare, and the service halfhearted. He remembered trips he had been on years ago, even the ones from New York to Boston, where substantial service had been provided by friendly and competent flight attendants. This time around, it had been a warm beer—four dollars, thank you very much—and a plastic bag that had taken him almost ten minutes to open and contained exactly five peanuts. Two minutes per crunch. How satisfying. And throughout the food and beverage service, a female flight attendant had been complaining to her male helper about a burglary the previous week at her apartment.

He closed his eyes as the jet stumbled through its landing, feeling his fists clench at the bumpy approach in. He didn't open his eyes until the plane had made it to the gate and the rest of the passengers had trooped off. After unbuckling his seatbelt he made his way forward and past the flight attendants, just nodding at their plastic "bye-byes," and went up the jetway and into the terminal.

Walking to baggage claim was slow going, for his right leg was acting up again. People in a hurry flowed about him as if they were a fast-moving stream and he a rock, cold and unmoving. The

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leg ached something fierce, right in the upper thigh, where a bullet had once torn through. The aching leg usually predicted rain but the cool May sky had been clear of clouds, so Sam figured it was his body again, unhappy at traveling, unhappy at another job in a foreign town, and letting him know about it. Tough. His body should talk to Raymo Keeley; it was Raymo's fault that he limped almost every day, for it was Raymo who'd shot him during that bungled liquor-store job on Seventh and 23rd, almost ten years ago.

So what. Raymo had gone to his reward, though not so soon as old Gus.

At the baggage claim his overnight black duffel bag was slowly going around the carousel. He had his claim check in hand but there was no one around to check him. Sloppy. All of this luggage right by a busy street filled with cars, buses, and taxicabs. So easy to race through and rip off a half-dozen pieces, with nobody seeing or caring.

The bag was heavy but comfortable in his hand, and he made it outside to a concrete island that had a sign that said COURTESY VEHICLES—LIMOUSINES. Horns blared and traffic was choked through the narrow lanes. There was a beefy man in a black suit, white shirt, and black tie, holding up a cardboard sign that had a single name scrawled on it: HANRATTY. He was leaning against a dark blue Town Car.

Sam went up to him. "Fenway Limo Service?"

"You got it," the man said.

"I'm Hanratty."

"Climb right in," the man said, opening the rear door and extending a hand for Sam's bag.

Sam held tight to the bag and got into the rear seat. The driver just shrugged and got into the front, and within seconds they were moving out of the terminal area and heading to an exit. Sam leaned back, bag at his side, and all the way into the city proper he and the driver exchanged not a single word, which was just fine.

The driver took him to a Sheraton Hotel in the downtown area, near the Prudential Center on Boylston Street. The ride had been slow and painful. Sam always had a hell of a time in Boston, for the damn city streets made no sense. Back home, you had to work to get lost, with everything set out in a pattern and in such perfect order. But in this crazy place, streets went one-way, two-way, and

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then one-way again, and one single street could have three or four names in the space of a half-dozen blocks. He also wasn't impressed with what he saw through the car window, but he knew his own hometown wasn't doing so great either. There were abandoned cars at the side of the street, great drifts of litter and trash along the sidewalks, and trembling men with plastic squeegees and buckets at the intersections. All the way in, too, he saw not a single cop.

After the driver dropped him off, he went through registration and check-in with a minimum of fuss and went up to his room. It was getting dark and he looked out at the lights of the city, feeling the pressure of a job that was due within twenty-four hours. He used the bathroom and went to the tiny desk by the side of his bed. Someone had been here before him, for in the top drawer was a nine-by-twelve brown envelope with "Hanratty" neatly typed in the center, and on top of the desk there was a small bottle of Jameson's Irish whiskey next to a full ice bucket. He filled a glass with ice cubes and splashed some whiskey over the cubes, and then stretched his aching leg out on the bed. He sipped at the whiskey and opened the envelope and got to work. Inside was a set of eight-by-ten photographs, color, showing a young man, maybe in his late twenties or early thirties. Stickers on the rear of each photo identified him: Sprague Coleman. He was dressed well, with expensive-looking suits, wrist jewelry, and hair that looked like it had only been touched by somebody calling him or herself a hair stylist. No barbers for Sprague Coleman. Behind the photos was a six-page biography of Sprague that was depressing and familiar reading, and a short note that said every Wednesday night, Sprague stopped for a fancy coffee at a restaurant on Newbury Street called the Appian Sway. How bloody cute. The note also said that Hanratty had a window of opportunity from 7 P.M. to 7:30 P.M., and that the cops wouldn't be a problem during that time period. Clipped to the sheaf of papers was a white square of cardboard about the size of a business card. On it was typed a phone number and a man's name. Underneath the name, in bold letters, was: FOR AN EMERGENCY ONLY.

Sam put the stuff back on the desk and stood up, feeling his back and knees creak. How many years had he spent doing this, and how many more remained? And what would good old Gus think?

"We're brooding," he announced to the empty room. "And brooding is bad. Time to focus."

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He went over to the bed, where his overnight bag remained. It would have been easy enough to carry it onto the jet and store it in one of the overhead compartments, but he was more relaxed letting the baggage handlers take care of it. Less chance for mistakes, for things being learned about his business.

The zipper was fastened by a small combination lock, which he quickly undid. After emptying the bag of his shaving kit, change of clothes, and a couple of paperback books, he raised up a false bottom that had a special and quite illegal shielding material built in. He felt around the foam rubber fittings in the base of the bag and pulled up a shoulder holster, two full clips of 9mm. ammunition, his Smith & Wesson Model 12, 9mm. automatic pistol, and a tube silencer. He laid out his tools on the floral bedspread and scratched at his chin.

His instructions had said that Sprague Coleman enjoyed a restaurant visit every Wednesday night. Today was Tuesday. He had less than twenty-four hours to plan the very public execution of one Sprague Coleman.

Again, an announcement to an empty room: "Piece of cake."

After putting his tools back in the bag and putting the bag away in a closet, he took a long shower, enjoying the sensation of cleaning up after the flight in from New York City, but also enjoying the chance to relax and decompress a bit before going out for some night work. When he got out, he decided on a quick shave, and looked at the tired blue eyes and thin, wet brown hair about his head as he drew the disposable razor across his skin. It was an all-right face, one that didn't drive the women crazy, but was at least nondescript and easily forgettable, which suited him just fine.

He dressed in new jeans and a green pullover sweater, and in a few minutes he was a block away from the Sheraton, walking down Newbury Street. He knew from his research and reading that this was one of the priciest pieces of real estate in Boston, and the storefronts told him that his research was correct. All of the buildings were two- or three-story brownstones, most remodeled into restaurants, gift shops, and specialty stores. Handbags gave way to shoes and then to imported coffee and medieval art. For May it was a warm night, and the sidewalks were crowded with people. The two-lane, one-way traffic was bumper to bumper.

For all the wealth and contented crowds of people, however, Sam saw little signs of rot, little indications of distress. Men and

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women in cast-off clothes, with thousand-yard stares, shuffled along the street and the sidewalks, shaking empty coffee cups, begging for change. A few of the stores were dark, plywood boarding up empty windows, the cracked wood marked with spray paint. Trash was still ankle deep, and there was the occasional bleeping howl of a car alarm. A blue and white Boston police cruiser inched along in the traffic, one headlight out, the right fender crumpled from an old accident. Both cops in the front seat looked exhausted.

Sam shrugged and kept on working. He saw the neon sign for the Appian Sway and crossed the street. Out of everything, he supposed he enjoyed the prep work the most, setting the scene, looking at the angles and possibilities, being the planner, knowing with sweet ecstasy that in less than a day someone would be meeting the fate that he had planned for him.

But there would be trouble ahead, that was for sure.

The place was too damn crowded.

He took a seat at a place next door called the Brass Cannon and had an iced tea, watching the Appian Sway at work. It would be too dangerous to spend extra time there. He didn't want any chance of later identification. The Appian Sway was mostly an outdoor cafe, with wrought-iron tables and chairs, sealed off from the street by a waist-high black metal fence. Each table had a blue and white umbrella overhead with the Appian Sway logo, and a corridor led into the restaurant proper. Not an empty table was to be seen, and there were easily twenty or thirty people within fifteen feet of the place.

What a mess.

He got up and ignored an outstretched coffee cup from a passing man with a garbage bag on his head, fastened by rubber bands, and went into the restaurant, thinking that a quick reconnoiter wouldn't hurt, and his mood was improved a bit. The damn place had another entrance, which was good. There was a counter where one could place an order and pick up some pastries, and a few tables inside in front of a door that led out to the next street over, Commonwealth Avenue. Not bad. Maybe it could work after all.

Still, all those people. He went back through the restaurant and out to Newbury Street, and after another thirty minutes found what he was looking for at a store that sold old science-fiction

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magazines and books. It was called Pulp Planet, and he was sorely tempted to buy some *Astoundings* from the early 1940s, but he refused to give in to temptation. No witnesses, no paper trails.

After all, he was a professional.

On his second day in Boston he visited the Museum of Fine Arts, enjoying walking through the cool corridors, looking at the hundreds of years of history at his fingertips. He found himself spending most of his time in the sections that had Roman and Egyptian art, where he was drawn to the dusty and shattered remains of those civilizations. They had endured for thousands of years before they fell apart, before the outsiders or barbarians or horsemen came and unseated them. He looked in vain for displays on the soldiers and centurions who had defended the empires, but there was nothing to remember them by. Just mementos of their governments, their ruling classes, their priests. And even they existed now only in books and museums, making a livelihood for a handful of professors throughout the world.

Not much of a legacy.

He checked the bright red numerals of the bedside clock. It was time. He'd spent the last hour in his hotel room, staring at the pictures of Sprague Coleman, committing each feature, every wrinkle and every smooth expanse of the man's skin to memory.

He got up and put on the shoulder holster, which was now holding his 9mm. Instead of a spare clip, he put the silencer in the leather holder that would have held the spare clip. No need for extra ammo tonight. Once he was satisfied that the holster was on right and wouldn't slip, he put on a heavy white cardigan, and over that a bright green nylon shell parka. Warm clothing, but it would do the job. He turned off the lights and left his room, and after going through the lobby he bought a copy of the day's *Globe* from the gift shop. He folded it in half and held it under his arm and walked outside. A light breeze had picked up and the weather had cooled, which was good. He didn't want to sweat, going to work.

Halfway to Newbury Street, he found that he was smiling. Not too tired yet, he thought, and he made his way along the sidewalk.

He walked the length of Newbury Street twice before the appointed time, and the thumping in his chest seemed to ooze and slow right down as he saw Sprague Coleman, smiling and happy

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and better looking than his photographs, sitting at an outdoor table in the Appian Sway. A muscular-looking man was sitting next to him, and they were joined by two young ladies who didn't seem to talk much but made up for it by laughing with bright eyes and stroking the arms of the men beside them. They were dressed almost identically, in short black dresses and leather jackets.

Sprague laughed along with them, but even at this distance, across the street, Sam could feel the tension in that face. Sprague had been in some dark rooms and had wet his hands many times, and Sam doubted there was much true humor behind those laughing eyes. Sprague had on a heavy black sweater and jeans, and his hair was perfect, not even a strand out of place.

Sure. Time to move on.

Sam crossed the street to the Appian Sway, and then swung away, heading over to the magazine and book shop, Pulp Planet. The store was small, with lots of shelves and old magazines and paperback books in plastic bags. Most of the people in the store were young men, maybe from MIT or Harvard, computer types, looking at the literary ancestors of their current science-fiction reading. Sam let them browse and made his way to the rear of the store, which had a single restroom and a fire-alarm pull box on the wall. He took out a handkerchief, wrapped it around his hand, and pulled down the handle.

Instantly a loud hooting noise echoed through the store. Sam ducked into the restroom, splashed water on the crotch of his pants, and then came out swearing and pulling at his zipper. The store manager, a young man with a stringy beard and a ring looped through a pierced eyebrow, came back, scowling.

"Did you see the jerk who pulled it?" he asked, his eyes darting around.

"Hell no," Sam said. "I was in the middle of a leak and nearly passed out."

"Well, you better get out, the firefighters are on their way," the manager said. "Damn it, this is the second time this month."

He went outside and joined the throng that was gathering around the outside of the store, and then came the far-off sound of sirens. He pushed his way through the crowd and sat on the steps of an abandoned brownstone and got to work. Hunched over, acting like he wasn't feeling well, Sam pulled his pistol free and worked the action, holding the open newspaper over his lap. He then threaded in the silencer and folded up the *Globe,* concealing

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his weapon in the newspaper. Not a bad paper as papers go, he thought, going back onto the sidewalk. Editorial page was too damn liberal, but it had the best sports page in the country.

By the time he reached the Appian Sway, the fire trucks had arrived at Pulp Planet. They blocked traffic, their lights bounding in great red beams off the buildings. Horns blared and people clapped and laughed as the firefighters trudged into the building in their heavy gear. The sound of their truck radios was punctuated by great bursts of static. As Sam entered the Appian Sway, he was smiling again, for most of the people around him weren't looking at the middle-aged man in the bright green parka shell.

They were looking at the show outside of the magazine store.

Nice.

He worked quickly. At a dirty table he swiftly picked up an empty coffee cup and saucer, and shoving the newspaper and pistol under his arm, he whistled as he went through the maze of tables, passing the one containing Sprague Coleman and his friends. Sam didn't bother looking at them as he went by, even though he was close enough to smell the scents and colognes that the foursome were wearing.

He took a deep breath, and then another. Good old Gus.

He put the coffee cup and saucer down, shifted the paper and 9mm. into his right hand. He turned, now holding the paper in his left hand. A step, and then another.

The pistol and the silencer were now about six inches from the back of Sprague's head.

He fired. There was a coughing sound, and he fired again and again. Sprague pitched forward, causing the table to shake, dishes to rattle, and the young women gasped and screamed, and the other man was frozen in shock, but Sam was moving, moving quite quickly, and didn't care what any of them did.

He got out of the maze of tables and into the restaurant, heading for the other exit. Again using the *Globe* as cover, he put the 9mm. back into the shoulder holster, deftly unscrewing the silencer in the process.

Shouts and another scream back there.

Out on Commonwealth Avenue, he took off the parka shell, rolled it up in a ball with the newspaper, and shoved them both into a trash can. He kept on walking, now wearing the cardigan sweater, buttoned over the shoulder holster. A few more yards,

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and then he bent down as if to tie his shoe and dumped the silencer into a sewer. No regrets. It was now useless, having only been good for one job. Nothing like the movies and the TV shows, where the cool-blooded assassin used the same silencer over and over again. Typical fast-food media rubbish.

Another deep breath, sweeter than the one before. Job done. Just a matter of walking two or three more blocks and he'd be back at the hotel, and this time tomorrow, he'd be safe at home in his apartment.

So close.

He rounded the corner and a Boston police cruiser was heading past him, going barrel-ass, lights flashing.

Okay, just ignore it.

A sharp squeal of brakes.

Nothing to do with you. They just made the corner, that's all.

A racing engine, coming back in reverse.

Keep on going, just keep on going.

A door opening. A voice: "Hey, hey you!"

Ignore, ignore, ignore.

"Hey, I'm talking to you! The guy in the white sweater! Hold up!"

He found that his hands were trembling. Not good, not good.

Sam turned, a hesitant smile on his face. "Who, me?"

The cruiser was at an angle, both doors open. One of the officers, a black man, was talking into a radio microphone. His white partner was coming up on the sidewalk, moving slow and easy, but his hand was on his holster. Nine millimeter Glocks. That's what the Boston cops now carried.

"Yeah, you," the cop said. His nametag said GRADY. "Where've you been the past few minutes?"

"I was up at the Common, and now I'm walking back to the hotel," Sam said. "I'm staying at the Sheraton."

"You stop at a coffee shop along the way, huh?"

"No, I didn't," Sam said. The other cop was now away from the cruiser, and was coming at him from another angle. Very good. These guys were young but they were good.

Grady smiled some more, but by now his weapon was out and at his side. "How come I don't believe you, then?"

"I don't really know," Sam said, knowing it was done, it was going down in flames and no parachutes were visible. Damn, to end it here in a town he didn't particularly like.

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"Ken," Grady called out, and he didn't have to say any more, as his partner got closer. He then said, "All right, mister, are you right-handed or left-handed?"

"Right-handed."

"Okay, using your left hand, start unbuttoning your sweater, will you?"

Sam swallowed. His throat was quite dry. He raised up his hands and put them behind his head, interlocking his fingers. "I'm afraid I can't do that."

The two cops had him bracketed, weapons now up and pointing at him. People were stopping and standing on the sidewalk, staring, and even in all of this, Sam felt the flush of shame.

"And why not?" the cop called Ken demanded.

"Because I'm carrying, and I'm afraid you'll panic and shoot me."

The cops glanced at each other and then Grady said, "I want you to kneel down very slowly. Do it now."

Sam closed his eyes. "Yes, Officer."

They yelled at him, they threatened him, they pleaded with him, and through it all Sam had just one answer to their demands: "I'd like to make a phone call, please." After a while they gave up on their threats and shouts, and he made his phone call, using the number provided to him back at the hotel. Then, as the cops in the precinct house went at him again, he waited.

But of course, this was Boston, and they didn't use precinct houses. They used districts. Like the one he was in now, District 4, on Warren Street. Not much charm or soul with that. Sam was put in an interrogation room similar to ones he had seen over the years. The battered and stained furniture. The stale smell of sweat and cigarette smoke. The mirror on one side that announced itself as one-way glass to anyone with an IQ above that of a squirrel. The mirror was flanked by open curtains. He sat there and folded his hands and waited.

Eventually the door opened and a black cop came in, but one dressed in a white shirt with gold braid. In his dark hands he held a coffee cup, which he passed over, and which Sam sipped at. The cop went over to the one-way glass and drew the dark green curtains shut. He sat down heavily in the chair across from Sam and Sam said, "What's the rank?"

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"Deputy superintendent. The name is Paxton, Theo Paxton. You're Cullen, right?"

"Yes sir, I am."

"Hell of a mess."

"It certainly is."

"You tell anybody anything?"

"Not a word," Sam said.

"Good," Paxton said. He leaned forward, folding his hands. "It's going to be tough, that's what I can say. The thing is, we got a quick ID of an older guy doing the business. You were the only older guy out and about on that block when the unit went by. Just tough luck, I guess."

Sam said, "I was told that I would have a window of opportunity for about a half-hour. No cops. What happened?"

"Something about a false fire alarm just down the street, and these guys tonight, they were real cowboys," Paxton said, almost apologetically. "They were supposed to be on a traffic detail, but they decided to roll over and take a look at the fire trucks. Then the call came in about what happened at the Appian Sway."

"I don't care much about luck," Sam said. "I just care about getting out of here."

"We're working on it, but it's going to be tough. You were carrying an unregistered firearm right in the area of a homicide and your clip is missing three rounds. A couple of witnesses were able to describe an older guy going through the restaurant right after the action. Hard to let that one squiggle through."

Sam stared straight into the other man's eyes. "I'm sure you'll do what it takes."

A quick nod. "Jesus, yes, of course we will, but you realize that you're burned in this city. You can't ever come back."

"That's the least of my worries."

Paxton took out a handkerchief and wiped at the back of his neck. "Man, this goddamn job . . . You want to talk about worries. Same story every year. Crime rates keep on going up, police budgets keep on getting cut, and the revolving doors at the courthouses get a fresh lubricating. Most nights, the collars we get, our guys are still doing the paperwork when the perps are rotated through and make bail and are back out on asphalt. Newspaper writers like to talk about thin blue lines. Hell, it ain't a line anymore. It's a picket fence."

Sam took another sip of his coffee, letting the other man speak.

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"Thing is, too," Paxton said, "we always know who the bad guys are. Always. But you get tired trying to prove that, and the attorney general's office is swamped, and it's pick and choose time when it comes to the cases, and, well, you see a lot of stuff slide through."

"I'm sure," Sam said. "Like Sprague Coleman, right?"

Paxton looked embarrassed. "You read the file, right?"

"Yeah."

"One rotten guy, nasty right to the center," Paxton said. "Connected to a good portion of the coke trade in this city. We know he's responsible for a couple of homicides, and we're pretty sure he gunned down a state trooper out on the Mass Pike last winter, just for the hell of it. Likes pretty girls, and when he's done with them, he ensures they're pretty no more, and then he lets his boys have a piece before they get dumped. A real charmer, Sprague, and you know how much time he ever did?"

"No, but I'm sure you'll tell me."

"Eighteen months," Paxton said, pausing for effect. "Eighteen months, and in a juvie facility! Eighteen months for boosting cars and attempted murder when he was sixteen, and that was it."

"Until tonight."

Paxton gave a slow nod, picked up his uniform cap. "Yeah, that's for damn sure." The cop got up and looked over and said, "What got you in, if you don't mind me asking?"

Sam shrugged. He had told this story many times before. "Liquor-store robbery. It went bad real quick. Best friend of mine, guy named Gus, he got torn in half by a shotgun. The guy who was the trigger man, he got off with manslaughter."

The cop frowned. "His defense?"

"Urban post-traumatic stress disorder. The pressures of living in the city and being an underprivileged youth made him predisposed to a life of crime. The assistant AG on the case was still in his first post-college suitcoat and tie, and the defense was a sharp one. The jury bought. Didn't even serve two years."

Paxton put his cap on. "At least he didn't blame it on his mother."

"Give them time, they'll get back to that soon enough."

"Stay tight, we'll get you out."

Sam finished his coffee. "I'm sure you will."

The deputy superintendent was true to his word, and within an

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hour Sam was out in the police station's parking lot, ready to be driven back to his hotel and then to Logan. Just as Paxton was leading him to the car, however, the young cop Grady appeared, dressed in civvies.

"What the hell is going on?" Grady demanded, his face red with barely contained fury. "This was a good collar, a great pinch, and we're letting him go?"

"Not your business, Officer," Paxton said, using his best command voice. "There wasn't enough evidence to hold him, so off he goes."

Sam tried not to look at the young man as he got into the front seat of the car. Grady yelled and slapped his hands on the car's fender. "That's bullshit and you know it! What the hell is going on here? Is he the mayor's brother? The commissioner's cousin?"

Paxton started the car and backed out of the lot and within a minute or two they were on the street. "Sorry," he said, steering past a double-parked car.

"No problem."

"We'll talk to him some more, straighten him out. Don't want him going to the *Globe* or to the *Herald.*"

Sam looked out at the passing buildings with no regret, knowing he would never be back in Boston again. "Give him a few more years, then he'll understand."

The next day he was back home and in the office of his boss. The man looked out on the streets below through a filthy window and said, "Are you sure they're all right in Boston?"

"Yes," Sam said, standing in front of the man's desk. "I can't ever go back, but they're pleased with the job."

"I'm sure they are. You do good work, ever since you took care of that character who killed Gus. Ray what's-his-name."

Sam nodded. "Raymo Keeley."

His boss turned in his chair and said, "What's it like in Boston?"

"Similar to here. Money being cut back, courts crowded, bad guys being set loose every day, nobody taking responsibility, nobody caring what's going on out there. Like that poet said: Things fall apart and the center can't hold."

"Some people care, you know that."

"Not enough."

His boss seemed to consider that. "True, but at least I can sleep at night, knowing we're trying."

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"I'm glad you can, sir."

"Not being smart with me, Sam, are you?"

"No, not at all," he said. "Guess I'm just being tired."

His boss smiled up at him and said, "Feel like a trip west in a month?"

"Where to?"

"California. Los Angeles has agreed to join in our trade program. Thought you'd like to go out there to set things up, show them what we've been doing on the East Coast. Tell them that it makes more sense this way. If the bad guys start disappearing for no apparent reason, the domestic forces will be suspected. But if the talent is imported, then all the bases are covered. I'm sure even the LAPD could figure that one out."

"Fine, sir."

"Anything else?"

Sam wanted to speak, wanted to say something about the museum he had been in yesterday, seeing the dusty exhibits of empires past. He wanted to tell his boss that he sometimes felt like the last Egyptian soldier or last Roman centurion on the ramparts, defending an empire that was collapsing from rot and decay, wondering if his efforts meant anything at all.

Instead, he said, "No, nothing."

Another smile. "Then why don't you get to work, Sam."

Outside his boss's office the din was almost deafening: phones ringing, keyboards clattering, voices rising in anger or despair. Sam was amazed at the tiny bit of duty that still burned inside him. He tugged at his sergeant's uniform and went behind the great wooden desk, just inside from the front entrance, and a woman was there, waiting, her eyes red-rimmed with tears. She was dressed in a nurse's uniform and as Sam picked up a blank report she said, "I just got off shift and got home and my apartment's been broken into. Everything's gone! And it's the second time this year!"

"Sorry to hear that, ma'am," he said, sliding a pen and a blank form over to her. "If you could just start by filling out this report."

She swore and grabbed the pen and said, "I wonder when in hell you cops are going to start doing something about the crime out there. Jesus, I also had my purse snatched last week. What are you guys doing anyway?"

Sam smiled at her. "We're working on it."●

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The Bridge Club

by Mignon F. Ballard

This new piece from Mignon Ballard follows hard on the heels of her recent win in the South Carolina Fiction Project's story competition. As part of the fiction-project prize, her entry "My Cousin From California" appeared in the *Charleston Post and Courier* in October of 1996.

"That Mr. November's a tall fellow, isn't he?" Alice watched the strange man stride up the walk and disappear through the gate across the street. "Right nice-looking too. Used to see him over there now and again during the week; now it looks like he's there to stay." She clucked. "Don't see how he can even be related to Amalthea Greenwood. What is he? Nephew? Cousin?"

"Nephew, I think, and his name is Novansy, not November, for goodness' sake!" Her bridge partner glared at her for trumping their own trick. "What'd you go and do that for?" Madge said. "Didn't you know that was *my* ace?"

"Sorry." Alice peered over bifocals at what she could see of the house where wisteria clung to yellowed stucco walls. If only she could see behind them! "Can't seem to concentrate with all that carrying on over there. Sounds like they're tearing the place apart. What you reckon's going on?"

"Why don't you ask Amalthea?" Pansy said.

"Don't think I haven't tried! Called three times at least, but that man always answers with some excuse why she can't come to the phone."

"Huh!" Madge huffed. "She just plain doesn't want to."

"Didn't see her at the library book sale last week either. You know how she always gets there early and picks over all the best ones." Alice drummed pink-tipped fingers on the table. "And don't think I wouldn't give her a piece of my mind, either! Why, the old Greenwood house has been there as long as I can remember. No telling what it's going to look like now. Amalthea never did have

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any taste." She stared gloomily at her cards, made a little *tsk-tsk* sound, and led from her king.

Madge sniffed. "Do you wonder?"

"I don't know, I find her rather fascinating," said Vera. "Maybe a little eccentric, but I've always kind of admired Amalthea. She does a lot of good and then there's that delightfully wicked laugh!" She took the trick with her queen and a triumphant, snickering bark. At fifty-two she was the youngest of the foursome and the newest member, having been a regular only twenty years.

Her partner scooped up the trick and slapped it into a messy pile. "Eccentric, my foot!" Pansy said. "Why is it everyone calls you eccentric when you reach a certain age? Amalthea Greenwood is downright peculiar...all those bleeding-heart causes! She was peculiar when Trenton Greenwood married her, and she's peculiar to this day!" She lowered her voice. "And frankly, I've been wondering about Amalthea...Don't remember the last time I saw her, do you?"

Madge arched a penciled brow. "Come to think of it, it has been awhile. You don't suppose she's gone and done something silly? I imagine Trenton left her quite well off. My Harry said he played the stock market like a ragtime piano—fast and furious, but with a flourish."

"And always managed to come out on top," Pansy said. "But then he was born with money to burn."

"And Amalthea's burning it." Alice threw off on Vera's lead. Suddenly she frowned. "At least I suppose she is . . . Madge, how do you know that man's her nephew?"

Her partner shrugged. "Guess I just assumed, but he's much too young to be her brother, and she never had children; doubt if she had time with all that running around doing good. And he certainly seems to be in charge over there."

"Seems Amalthea told me once she was an only child." Vera smiled, showing white, even teeth which she claimed to be all her own. "Said she didn't have any family left."

"Then who could he be? Oh dear, you don't suppose . . ." Alice's eyes widened in horror. "And poor Trenton only gone since last summer. Why, he could be up to who-knows-what, and I'll bet Amalthea doesn't know a thing about him. Of course, that's just like her. God only knows where he came from."

"He's much too young for her." Pansy studied her hand. "Besides, what could he possibly see in Amalthea?"

Vera giggled. "Got a calculator?"

"Well, just remember what *she* came from!" Madge held a dainty hankie to her nose. Her blue eyes blinked and

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watered as if the thought made them sting.

"Waitress, wasn't she? Some little restaurant outside Atlanta?" Vera tossed in her last two cards and reached for the scorepad. "Made it and one over, partner!"

But Pansy, her apple-doll face crimped tight, glowered at the house across the street. "That's not what I heard," she said.

"Actually, you're both wrong," Alice said. "Amalthea was a sales-clerk at Barton's—remember that fancy men's store in downtown Atlanta? Trenton bought everything he wore there. I'll never forget when he first brought her here after they married—bragged about Amalthea being the best bargain he ever got at Barton's."

"Trenton always was a fool," Pansy said. "I think he actually expected us to take that woman to our bosoms. As if she could take Martha's place!"

Madge made a rumbling noise in her throat. "Why, Martha and I went to school together. Our mothers were best friends."

"Remember those dainty lemon tarts she used to make? The Greenwoods gave such wonderful parties then!" Alice absently shuffled the cards. "Poor Martha! Hardly cold in her grave before that fool Trenton up and married Amalthea." She snorted. "No prize there!"

"He was to Amalthea," Madge said. "I can just imagine what she had to do to win him too."

"Madge! Shame!" Pansy simpered. "Remember that disastrous dinner party she gave? It was the first year they were married—you were there, Alice. You too, Madge. Served everything from cans—"

"Except for the dessert . . . watermelon, wasn't it?" Pansy shook her head. "Can you imagine? Watermelon! Great big wedges of it on Martha's good china."

"And rolls straight out of the package—didn't even warm them first." Alice hesitated. "But I wonder if she's really all right? I mean, with that man over there and all. The woman ought to have better sense!"

Vera stood at the window. "I can see the top of the new wing through the trees. They must be almost through, and about time too! Been at it for months now."

Alice adjusted her glasses and leaned forward to see over her neighbor's massive brick wall. "Did you say *wing?* What wing?"

"Mr. Novansy told me Amalthea was adding a rather large addition. Ran into him in the post office last week. Friendly fellow. I believe he's her contractor." Vera's eyes sparkled. What fun to know something before the others! She knew the only reason they had accepted her into their group was because her mother had been a

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Hollingsworth and the Hollingsworths once owned most of the real estate in town. Even so it was rough in the beginning. If her husband didn't work for Pansy's she'd never have put up with them.

"Why in the world would Amalthea Greenwood need a new wing? She must rattle around in that big old house as it is. Dear God, that man must have some kind of hold on her!" Pansy joined Vera at the window and shoved the heavy drapes aside.

"Ought to sell that place," Madge said. "Go on back where she belongs. Can't imagine why she wants to stay around here."

"Oh, I can't either." Vera spoke softly.

"She's never even come to a town meeting," Pansy said. "No civic pride. My Horace fought tooth and nail to keep this street zoned residential, and the Greenwoods didn't lift a finger to help."

"Fat lot of good it did," Alice said. "Willow Hills isn't what it was. I hear they're building *condominiums* on that lot where the Varnadore house used to be. Of course, you couldn't expect Amalthea to care!"

Madge restlessly ruffled the deck. "It's not that I'd intentionally set out to hurt anyone's feelings, but that woman's been here over twenty years and never has fit in—bless her heart. Why, Letitia James invited her to a drop-in once and she left *lipstick* on her good linen napkin!"

"I doubt if she's ever used anything but paper," Alice said. Rising, she pressed her forehead against the window and squinted. "There he is again—that Mr. Nov . . . ansy. My goodness, he *is* a handsome man! And look, there's Amalthea—smiling to beat the band—just like the cat that swallowed the sparrow. Hanging onto his arm like she's glued there. Disgusting! Do you suppose he's really her contractor?"

"That's *canary,* Alice," Madge scoffed. "And I'll wager that's not all he is! What are they doing now?"

"Putting up some kind of sign," Vera said.

"Sign! Where?" Pansy stood so quickly her chair fell with a whack.

"At the entrance—there by the gate." Vera narrowed her eyes to read it.

"Well, for heaven's sake, what does it say?" Madge's face went from red to white.

Vera turned away to hide her smile. *"Willow Hills Shelter for the Homeless,"* she announced a little louder than necessary.

And through the open window, from the house across the street, she could swear she heard Amalthea Greenwood's wicked, wicked laugh. ●

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Art by Theodore Iszler

THE HORSESHOE NAIL

by Bill Pronzini

The High Sierra sawmill camp was spread out on a flat along the Truckee River south of Verdi, just across the Nevada state line. It was larger than Quincannon had expected: several barns and corrals, storehouse, cookhouse, a pair of bunkhouses, blacksmith's shop, lumberyard, string of rough-log cabins for the foreman and crew bosses, and the huge steam-powered mill built back into the mouth of a canyon rimmed by high volcanic cliffs. A railroad spur cut through the camp, as did a pair of rutted wagon roads, one from Verdi, which followed the rail line, and the other connecting the sawmill with its logging camp higher up in the mountains.

The place was a swarm of activity: teamsters, swampers, and handlers working with horses and oxen; freighters shunting mule-drawn wagons laden with supplies; men working with long pike poles on the logs that clogged the pond alongside the mill; men

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stacking and cutting and loading rail cars with lumber and cordwood. The air rang and hummed with the steady metallic whine of the circular saws. The mill cut better than thirty thousand feet of lumber each day in peak season—and there was a rush on now, as autumn lengthened, to maintain a high production pace before the snows came and shut down operations for the winter.

There was no taste yet of snow in the air; the woods scent mixed with the sharp tang of fresh-cut logs was almost summery. The sun lay warm on Quincannon's face as the bullwhacker beside him drove the big Studebaker freight wagon down the Verdi road into camp. It was a fine day to be in the mountains, he thought. An early frost had colored the leaves of the cottonwoods fringing the river, and far up on the mountainside he could see patches of shimmering gold where quaking aspens grew among the pine. Fall days like this one reminded him of his youth. And of the season he had spent working in a sawmill camp in the Oregon woods. That season would make the job that had brought him here easier; once he took his bearings, he would neither look nor feel out of place.

He glanced down at the rough timber-cruiser's outfit he wore. With his thick freebooter's beard, he even *looked* like a lumberman. A smile bent the corners of his mouth. Ah, if Sabina could see him now, a fine Bunyanesque figure of a man, steely-eyed, with the mountain wilderness all around him and the hot blood raging in his veins . . . would she finally weaken, find herself overcome with uncontrollable passion? She wouldn't succumb to wit, sophistication, or clever subtleties; perhaps raw earthiness was

"Pronzini not only has talent in abundance, he has talent for abundance," William DeAndrea says in *Encyclopedia Mysteriosa*, "turning out high-quality work in various genres." One of the genres in which Mr. Pronzini displays his talent is the western. In his new story for *EQMM* the author works some of the conventions of the western into the framework of a true whodunit. Both Mr. Pronzini and his wife Marcia Muller, whose story opens this issue, are innovators in the field of mystery fiction. ✝

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the secret route to her heart and her bed. He would have to find out when he returned to San Francisco, riding yet another triumph as the mighty Bunyan rode Babe the Blue Ox. . . .

The bullwhacker brought his mules to a stop at the rear of the cookshack. Two men waited there, a long-queued Chinese cook in a white apron and a shaggy-bearded beanpole of about fifty dressed in congress boots and a pair of high-topped pants. The cook's interest was in the wagonload of stores; the beanpole's was in Quincannon. He approached as Quincannon swung down, warbag in hand, and looked him over with a blearily critical eye.

"You the new cheater?" he demanded in a rusty-file voice.

"Cheater?" Quincannon's memory jogged. "Timekeeper and scaler—that's right. But only an assistant and only temporary."

"How temporary?"

"No more than a week. I won't be needed past then."

"Too bad for you. This here's a highball camp, best in the Sierras. I ought to know. What's your name?"

"John Quincannon."

"Scot, eh? I got nothing against Scots." He scratched at a scrawny neck as wrinkled as an old pair of logger's tin pants. His own trousers were stiff with dirt and held up by the most enormous galluses Quincannon had ever seen. Oddments such as twists of baling wire decorated the galluses; a miscellany of hand tools hung from a belt around his waist. "Mine's Ned Coombs. Nevada Ned, they call me. I'm the bullcook here—best damn bullcook in this or any other camp. What do you say to that?"

Quincannon shrugged. A bullcook was a camp chore boy, usually a superannuated logger and often enough a souse suffering from locomotor ataxia. Despite the name, a bullcook had nothing to do with the preparation of food; his workday consisted of sweeping out the bunkhouses, cutting and bringing in fuel, washing lamps, and the like. "If you say you're the best, I'll take your word for it."

"Damn well better," Nevada Ned said. "You got any drinkin' likker in your kick?"

"No."

"No? How come?"

"I don't use it."

"Hell you say. A cheater that don't use likker." He spat on the ground at Quincannon's feet and then produced a four-ounce bottle from a pants pocket, yanked out the cork, and took a long

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draught. After which he made a face and said, "Jakey. Can't afford better, and now I'm almost out. Sure you ain't got any good likker?"

"I'm sure. Where do I find Jack Phillips?"

"Camp office." Nevada Ned had lost interest in him. "Ask anybody," he said and turned his back and disappeared around the corner of the cookshack.

Quincannon found his way to the camp office, a cottonwood-shaded building near the lumberyard. Jack Phillips, High Sierra's foreman, turned out to be a burly gent in his late thirties, with a black beard almost as thick and piratical as Quincannon's. An unlit corncob pipe jutted at an authoritative angle from the midst of all the facial brush. When they were alone in the foreman's private cubicle, Quincannon presented him with the letter of introduction he'd been given in Sacramento. Phillips scowled as he read it, and when he was finished he slapped it down on his desk and transferred the scowl to his visitor.

"How is it a flycop has such pull with Cap Fuller?" he asked. Cap Fuller was the head of the High Sierra Logging Company and Phillips's boss.

"I don't know Mr. Fuller," Quincannon said. "It so happens he's a friend of Senator Johannsen, and the senator—"

"—is a friend of yours."

"Satisfied former client would be more accurate."

Phillips grunted. "Well! I'll cooperate because I've been ordered to. But I don't mind telling you, I don't like it."

"Why is that, Mr. Phillips?"

"Flycop sneaking around my camp, pretending to be somebody he's not, putting the arm on one of my men—it's bad for morale."

"If all goes according to plan, no one but you and me and Mr. Fuller need ever know about it."

Another grunt. "Besides, Guy DuBois is my best sawyer. I hate like hell to lose him this late in the season."

"He's also a thief."

"You sure about that? No doubt he's the one stole that woman's jewelry?"

"None," Quincannon said.

"Rich San Francisco widow taking up with a French Canadian logger—don't make much sense to me."

"DuBois's sister was one of Ida Bennett's maids. Mrs. Bennett was the one who sent the wire notifying him when the sister died

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unexpectedly two weeks ago. She met him at the funeral, felt sorry for him, and invited him to her home for dinner. Matters evidently progressed rapidly from that point."

"Talked her out of her drawers, eh?"

"Not that she admitted, but I suspect so. It wasn't until after DuBois left the city that she discovered the three valuable items of jewelry were missing."

"A brooch, a pendant, and a ring worth fifty thousand dollars?"

"Diamonds, rubies, and platinum gold, Mr. Phillips."

"Well, what makes you think he brought them back here with him?"

"A strong hunch backed by facts. I traced his movements from San Francisco; he went straight to Sacramento and straight from there to Verdi."

"Could've stashed the loot somewhere along the way, couldn't he?"

"He could, but where? He's a timber beast—no permanent home, no relatives now that his sister has passed on, no safe-deposit box that I've been able to locate. I like the odds that the booty is still in his possession."

"Why in hell would he do such a fool thing as to come back and resume his work as a sawyer if he has fifty thousand in jewelry in his kick? If it were me, I'd've kept right on traveling east."

Quincannon said, "My guess is that his motive is a fool's mix of cleverness and uncertainty. The widow Bennett knows he was working here; he might believe it's the last place anyone would look for him. And because he's not a professional thief, it's likely he hasn't a clear idea of how to dispose of the swag. By continuing at his job until the camp shuts down he can finance a winter search for a fenceman, one who'll give him top dollar."

"All well and good," Phillips said, "but I still don't see why you can't just arrest him now instead of skulking around on the sly first."

"The safe return of the jewelry is Mrs. Bennett's paramount concern," Quincannon explained. "Punishment for DuBois is secondary."

"So? If he has the goods with him, he'd tell you where they are or you'd find them on your own."

"Not necessarily. He may have found a clever hiding place in all this wilderness that will elude my searches. And thieves in his position, once caught, sometimes develop the sly notion of remain-

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ing silent so they can return for the swag when they get out of prison."

"Beat the hiding place out of him, then. That's what I'd do."

"A last resort, Mr. Phillips. I prefer to use my wiles rather than my fists." Particularly with a client as rich as Mrs. Ida Bennett, who was paying Carpenter and Quincannon, Professional Detective Services, a handsome daily retainer.

"No more than a week of you and your wiles?"

"No more than that, and with any luck, considerably less. If I haven't recovered the jewelry by this time next week, I'll arrest DuBois—quietly, of course—and adopt the persuasive approach."

"Well, I still don't like it, but since I don't have a vote in the matter . . ." Phillips lit his corncob with a sulphurous lucifer and puffed up a cloud of acrid smoke. "Where do you want to be quartered, bunkhouse or private cabin?"

"Where does DuBois hang his hat?"

"He has a cabin."

"I'd prefer one near his, then, if that can be arranged."

"It can. Anything else?"

"Names of his friends, and something about his habits."

"He has no friends. DuBois isn't well liked—he's a loner and owns a surly disposition, the more so when he's been drinking. We don't permit the public consumption of alcohol, and drunkenness is grounds for dismissal, but some of the men . . ." Phillips shrugged. "Sawmill camps are rough-and-tumble places. As I assume you know, since Cap Fuller's letter says you're familiar with the business."

Quincannon nodded. "Is drinking DuBois's only vice?"

"No. Stud poker's another."

"Ah. Does he play with a core group?"

"Ben Irons, his setter at the mill. Okay King, the blacksmith. Hank Ransome, one of the teamsters. No one else on a regular basis."

"How often?"

"Most nights for a few hours after supper."

"His cabin?"

"No. Usually Okay King's."

"Good," Quincannon said, smiling. "Very good."

"If you say so." The foreman squinted at him through tendrils of smoke. "One more thing I'd like to know, Quincannon. Do you

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intend to just prowl around camp all day, taking up space, or will you make yourself useful in your sham role?"

"Useful?"

"You're supposed to be an assistant timekeeper. There's plenty of work to be done by the man holding that position. I'd feel better about your presence if you'd do your share between skulks and searches. Assuming you'll be here more than one day, that is. And assuming you can handle the job."

"Oh, I can handle it," Quincannon told him. "For the standard assistant's wages, of course."

"Wages?" Phillips was indignant at first; then his mouth shaped into a crooked smile. "By God, you've got gall, I'll give you that. Wages! All right, then—wages paid for work done. Agreed?"

"Agreed, Mr. Phillips. And you'll not regret it. No man works harder for an honest dollar than John Quincannon."

The cabins, some ten in all, were arranged in a staggered row, some shaded by tall pines, others afforded a measure of privacy by elderberry and chokecherry bushes. All were small, single-room affairs, and the one Quincannon was given was as spare as a monk's cell: sheet-iron stove, puncheon table, wall bench, and a pole bunk mattressed with finely cut fir boughs and covered with wool blankets. That was all, save for a lantern hanging from a wall peg. A small glass-paned window admitted tree-filtered shafts of sunlight. The only means of protection against intruders was a pair of iron brackets mounted one on each side of the door, into which a heavy wooden crossbar could be fitted.

Quincannon stowed his warbag under the bunk and took himself to the cabin three away from his that Phillips had pointed out to him as Guy DuBois's. There was no one else in the vicinity; he slipped around to the side to have a look through the window. The interior was similar to his, except that it was considerably more cluttered. DuBois's duffel, jammed under the bunk, bulged invitingly.

Back at the front, he made sure he was still alone and unobserved and then quickly slipped inside and shut the door again behind him.

The cabin stank of unwashed clothing, woodsmoke, and alcohol. The ripe blend of odors set him to breathing through his mouth as he knelt beside the bunk.

The duffel was not the only item wedged underneath. Pushed

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back behind the bag was a small wooden case. He checked the case first. It contained half a dozen identical dark-brown bottles; the label on one he lifted out bore a steel-engraved photograph of a healthy-looking gent and the words Perry Davis's Pain Killer. Quincannon was familiar with the product—a patent medicine that claimed to have great thaumaturgic powers, good for man and beast, but whose main ingredient was pure alcohol. It was more potent, in fact, than most lawfully manufactured whiskies.

He turned his attention to the duffel and its contents. Wads of soiled shirts, socks, and union suits. A new, sealed deck of playing cards. A torn dime novel featuring the exploits of a character named Mexican Bill, the Cowboy Detective. And a leather drawstring pouch that clinked and rattled when he shook it. The pouch, however, turned out to be a disappointment. All it contained was a collar button, a woman's corset stay, two Indian head nickels, the nib of a pen, and half a dozen other odds and ends of value only to DuBois.

He replaced the pouch and the rest of the items, pushed the duffel and the case of Pain Killer back under the bunk. Then he searched the remainder of the room, beginning with the pair of calked boots, coil of rope, and other logger's paraphernalia littering the floor against the wall under the window. He even went so far as to feel in among the fir boughs lining the bunk and to check the stove's ash box and flue.

There was no sign anywhere of the stolen jewel-work.

Well, he thought philosophically, he hadn't really expected to find the swag so easily, had he? Time was on his side—time, and a handsome fee and day wages besides. He cracked the door open, peeked out. A foraging jay had the area to itself; it flew off squawking and scolding when Quincannon emerged and sauntered away along the river bank.

Before returning to the camp office to begin his assistant timekeeper's duties, he detoured to the sawmill for a gander at Guy DuBois in the flesh. The widow Bennett had described the French Canadian to a bitter tee, but Quincannon preferred to take the measure of an adversary himself well in advance, if possible, of any sort of face-to-face confrontation.

The huge circular saws were quiet when he stepped inside the cavernous enclosure. This was because a fresh log, just winched up from the pond below, was being rolled into place on the saw carriage and clamped down by means of iron "dogs." The setter—

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Ben Irons, he assumed, a keg of a man with drooping, tobacco-stained moustaches—used his levers to move the log into position for the first cut. The sawyer, DuBois, then stepped in close to the two blades, one set directly above the other, their sharp teeth almost touching. When he started the carriage, steadying its progress as the saws bit deep into the wood, streams of sawdust flew high and the screech of steel against wood was deafening.

Quincannon watched DuBois as he and Irons sliced off a slab of rough bark and wood that would be chopped up into firewood, then commenced reducing the log to thinner strips of board lumber. The French Canadian was a much less imposing figure than Ida Bennett had led him to believe; in fact, DuBois was anything but a "handsome little devil." Short, long-necked, knobby-armed, with a nose like a cant hook, a sullen mouth, and eyes sunk deep under wire-brush brows—altogether an unlovely specimen, in Quincannon's estimation. Mrs. Bennett must have been lonelier than he'd thought, and with poorer eyesight, to have taken DuBois into her home and bed.

He was smiling as he left the mill. He had six inches in height and fifty pounds in solid weight on the sawyer, not to mention years of experience in the niceties of handling felons; he would have no trouble with DuBois when the time came to make his arrest. This job was looking better all the time—a veritable lark compared to some he'd had in recent months. The only challenge was locating the whereabouts of the stolen jewelry, and for a detective with his talents, he didn't see how he could fail to meet it successfully, sooner or later.

Supper was served in the cookshack, at a single table that ran the length of the room and was flanked by wooden benches. Quincannon contrived to find a seat across from DuBois, the better to observe him and to listen in on his conversations. A good plan, except that it produced no results. DuBois sat alongside Ben Irons and a barrel-chested gent with a lion's mane of blond hair—Okay King, the blacksmith—but spoke to neither of them nor to anyone else. He kept his eyes on his plates of boiled potatoes, corned beef, baked beans, and cornstarch pudding, ate hurriedly and wolfishly, and then left the table, alone, before any of the other men were finished.

When DuBois was gone, Quincannon tried to strike up conversations with both Irons and King. Neither man showed more than

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a cursory interest in him. Loggers and sawmill camp workers could be standoffish with newcomers until they got to know them, and Quincannon, despite his gregarious nature, was no exception. It would take some doing to cultivate Irons and King to the point where he could ask them probing questions about DuBois and expect straightforward answers. He could begin the cultivation, he thought, at the stud game tonight.

But he was wrong. The game, in Okay King's cabin, was already in progress when he arrived, and all six places were filled. And they stayed filled for the next hour, forcing him into a passive kibitzing role. Conversation among the players was desultory; DuBois, again, had almost nothing to say to anyone. The stakes were low—coins rather than greenbacks—but the French Canadian played as if he were in a cutthroat, high-stakes game, betting conservatively, keeping his hole cards close to his chest, and studying them, the cards faceup on the table, and the faces of his opponents with a brooding concentration.

His luck was poor tonight; he lost steadily, often with second-best hands. His expression darkened into a sullen glower and he began nipping at a bottle of Perry Davis's Pain Killer without offering it to any of the others. Not a good loser, DuBois. When his nine-high straight was beaten by Okay King's queens full, he slammed his fist down on the table and growled, *"Sacre Dieu!* If I do not know better, *mon ami,* I think maybe you make your own luck."

King glared back at him. "But you do know better, don't you, Frenchy?" he said in a deceptively mild voice.

"Perhaps. But the cards are yours."

"Same cards we always play with."

"I say we play with a new deck."

"And I say we don't. Anybody else think there's something wrong with this one?"

Headshakes. Irons said, "Whose deal is it? Mine?"

DuBois's eyes were still on the blacksmith. He said angrily, *"J'en ai plein le cul!"*

"You want to cuss me," King said, laying his massive hands flat on the table, "by God, do it in English."

"Bah! I am sick of this game, that's what I tell you."

"Then quit, why don't you?"

DuBois bounced to his feet, kicking over the box he'd been sitting on, and scraped up his few remaining coins. "So!" he said. "I

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quit!" And he stormed out of the cabin and banged the door behind him.

Quincannon moved over to right the upended box. "Mind if I sit in, lads?"

The men around the table looked him over. Okay King shrugged and said, "Sit. Your money's good as anybody's."

"New cheater, ain't you?" the teamster, Hank Ransome, asked.

"Assistant. And a more honest cheater you'll never meet."

The men liked that; all of them except Okay King laughed. The humorless blacksmith asked him, "What's the name again?"

"Quincannon. John Quincannon."

"Scot, eh? Well, I reckon a Scot's got a better chance than most of being honest."

"He has for a fact. And I'm not half so feisty as the former occupant of this seat. That French Canadian has a fine temper."

"You don't know the half of it," Irons said. "Ought to work with him on a saw carriage all day long."

"Difficult fellow?"

"Difficult? Grizzly bear's got a better disposition."

"What's the source of his bile?"

"Born with it, and it's eating his vitals."

"Along with that Perry Davis he's so fond of," Ransome said.

"Is that what makes him such a poor loser?"

"Among other things. Fact is, he don't like losing at nothing. Don't trust nobody either, that Frenchy. Anything goes wrong for him, he figures it's somebody else's fault—somebody out to do him dirt. Only one doing him dirt's his own self."

"To hell with DuBois," Okay King said. "We're here to play stud and time's growing short. Deal the cards, Ben, and let's get on with it."

They played until ten o'clock, with Quincannon winning more hands than he lost. He tried twice more to steer the sporadic table talk around to DuBois, but the others wanted no more of the French Canadian tonight. He counted the evening a success, nonetheless. He'd learned enough about his quarry and the men's feelings toward the man to discard the notion that any of them, or anyone else in the camp, was in cahoots with him; DuBois was too much of a loner and too suspicious of others to have let on to anyone about the stolen jewelry. Nor would he have hidden the swag anywhere it was likely to be found by accident. He would have it

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close at hand, where he could check on it regularly to make sure it was safe.

Quincannon whistled a jaunty tune as he walked back to his cabin. Not only was he one step closer to finding the loot, but he had won twelve dollars at stud—another little bonus to add to his accumulating pile. Today had been profitable in more ways than one. Tomorrow might be even more so.

DuBois's cabin, he noticed as he passed by, was dark, and not even a dribble of smoke came from its stovepipe chimney. No fire to ward off the night's chill? Well, loggers in general, and French Canadians in particular, were a hardy lot. Sleep well, *mon ami,* he thought cheerfully. Your time is about up.

He didn't know until morning how right he was.

DuBois's time was up, for a fact. Permanently.

It was the bullcook, Nevada Ned, who brought the news. When Quincannon trudged sleepily through the frosty five A.M. darkness to the cookshack, summoned by the cook's bell, there was no sign of the sawyer; and when DuBois still hadn't arrived by the middle of breakfast, an annoyed Jack Phillips sent Ned to find out what was keeping him. The bullcook came rushing back inside of ten minutes, as the men were finishing the last of their boiled coffee, waving his arms and shouting at the top of his voice.

"He's dead! By grab, he's deader than a boiled owl!"

Phillips, sitting near Quincannon, was on his feet first. He called over the general commotion, "What're you babbling about, Ned? Who's dead?"

"DuBois. Frenchy. Lyin' on the floor of his cabin, deader than a boiled owl."

"The devil you say! How? What happened to him?"

"Side of his head's busted in. Looks like he tripped on a coil of rope and cracked his skull wide open on the stove."

The cookshack emptied swiftly, Phillips leading the rush of men and Quincannon, muttering "Hell and damn!" under his breath, close behind. Pale dawnlight had begun to seep into the eastern sky, but the shadows were still long and thick in the surrounding woods and across ground so heavy with frost it looked snow-patched; Phillips carried a lantern he'd claimed from Nevada Ned, and several of the others had lighted their lamps as well. When they reached DuBois's cabin, the foreman reached out for the latch.

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"Can't get in that way," Ned told him. "Barred inside—I tried it before I come running."

They hurried around to the side window. Phillips held the lantern up close to the dusty glass; Quincannon crowded in next to him. The lamplight threw wavery shadows over the dark interior, over the figure of DuBois sprawled facedown in front of the stove, his arms drawn back against his sides. Dried blood gleamed faintly on the raw wound above his left temple.

Phillips half turned to scan the faces behind him. "Ned," he said to the bullcook, "you're not much wider than a fence pole. Think you can squeeze through here?"

"Sure thing, once I shuck my mackinaw. Want me to bust out the glass?"

"I'll do it. Give me your hammer."

Ned slipped the hammer free of its belt loop, handed it over, and Phillips broke the window and cleaned shards from the frame. Then the bullcook wriggled his beanpole body through the opening and went to unbar the door. Quincannon made sure he was the first man inside after Phillips, the first to kneel down for a close look at the dead man. Caught around DuBois's left ankle was a loop of hemp from the coil against the wall under the window. Blood was smeared on a lower corner of the stove, as well as on DuBois's hair and cracked skull. Quincannon touched an edge of it with his forefinger: dried to a crust. When he grasped one of the backflung arms he found it stiff and unyielding: the early stages of rigor mortis.

Dead since sometime last night, he thought. Eight or nine hours. Dead, by God, when I walked by at ten o'clock.

Behind him Okay King said, "Drunk, likely. Drunk on Perry Davis and staggering around in the dark."

"Damn fool," Phillips agreed disgustedly.

"Ain't much of a loss, you ask me."

"Poor excuse for a man, I'll grant you that, but good at his job. It's too late in the season to find another sawyer. That means extra shifts for everyone at the mill, same as when he was in Frisco."

During this exchange, and while the mill hands were grumbling at the foreman's words, Quincannon made a quick, deft search of DuBois's clothing. If the brooch, pendant, and diamond ring had been on the body, he'd have found them. And he didn't.

Veritable lark, eh? Minor challenge? Faugh!

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As Quincannon straightened, Ben Irons said, "Blasted Frenchy, makin' trouble dead as well as alive. If he had to have a freak accident, why couldn't he wait until we shut down for the winter?"

Wrong, Mr. Irons, Quincannon thought darkly. Not a freak accident. Not on your tintype.

Murder.

Murder plain and simple.

On Phillips's orders, three of the men removed DuBois's corpse and carried it to the loading dock, where it was to be held for shipment to Verdi on the morning train. The rest, except for Quincannon, dispersed to begin their day's work. He faded away to his own cabin, so as to avoid, for the time being, another private talk with Phillips in the camp office. The foreman would want to know his intentions now that DuBois was dead, and he wasn't ready yet for that discussion, or to reveal the truth about his quarry's demise.

He waited fifteen minutes, ruminating over a pipeful of shag tobacco. Then he transferred his Navy Colt from his warbag to his belt, buttoned his shirt over it, and returned to DuBois's cabin.

It was deserted now. He let himself inside. Sunrise was only a few minutes away, but little of the morning light penetrated the broken window; he lighted DuBois's lantern. In its glow he first examined the stove and the floor around it. Next he studied the door, the iron brackets mounted on either side of it, and the wooden crossbar. There was a tiny hole, almost a gouge, high up on the door. And near one end of the bar he found a fresh, five-inch vertical furrow.

He lowered the lantern and searched the floor here. Among the boot-crushed remains of window glass he spied a horseshoe nail, two inches long and slightly bent. It hadn't been there long; it was shiny new, free of dust. He nodded in satisfaction and dropped the nail into his shirt pocket.

Only one question remained now.

Had DuBois been killed for the stolen jewel work or for some other reason?

He continued his search, leaving no corner of the room and nothing in it uninspected. He felt along the underside of the table, probed the walls and floor for loose boards and the legs of the table and the bunk poles for hollows. He reexamined the stove and its flue, the logger's boots, and other items strewn under the win-

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dow. He sifted once more through the four bottles of Perry Davis's Pain Killer, through the clothing and other contents of DuBois's duffel.

"Hell and damn!" he muttered aloud when he was done.

He had the answer to his question of motive. But what he still didn't have was Ida Bennett's expensive baubles.

The blacksmith shop stood on the bank of a shallow creek that flowed into the Truckee, not far from the barn and corrals. Made of unbarked logs like the other camp buildings, it had a steep shed roof but neither doors nor windows. As Quincannon approached the wide entrance he saw Okay King and another man working at a heavy wooden crib set alongside the forge and bellows. Inside the crib, slung from a windlass-drawn harness fashioned of heavy bands of leather and rope, its four legs tied to the corner timbers, was a wild-eyed and bellowing ox.

The second man, a bullwhacker from the looks of him, was saying to the ox, "Quit your hollerin', Tex. This ain't hurtin' you none," as Quincannon entered.

King was hunched over by the animal's near hind foot, trimming off the rough edges of the hoof and cleaning it with a sharp knife. Finished with that, he laid one half of a new shoe against the hoof. The fit wasn't right; he took the shoe to the forge, thrust it under the coals with a pair of tongs, and pumped the bellows until the coals flared a smoky red. When he stepped back to wait for the heat to soften the iron, he spied Quincannon. His sweating face pinched into a scowl.

"What is it *you* want?"

"Two minutes of your time."

"You've got eyes, man, you can see I'm busy."

"It's important," Quincannon told him. "Did you know DuBois long enough and well enough to make a guess as to where he might have hidden something of value?"

"Hidden something? Hidden *what?* What the devil are you gabbling about?"

"There's no time to explain now. Can you make a guess?"

"No," King said. "All I know about Frenchy is that I didn't like him any more'n a horse's hind end. He went his way, I went mine. Stud poker's all we had in common, and damn little there. Talk to Ben Irons and Hank Ransome—they knew him better than I did."

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Quincannon produced the horseshoe nail and held it up for King to see. "One of yours, I'll warrant."

The blacksmith squinted at it, wiping his hands on a fire-blackened leather apron. "Looks like. Why?"

"It was on the floor of DuBois's cabin. Would he have had any reason to keep horseshoe nails?"

"A sawyer? Not hardly. Somebody might've tracked it in on a boot sole this morning. Anyhow, what's a blasted nail got to do with anything?"

"A great deal," Quincannon said. "Oh, a great deal, Mr. King."

He asked two more questions, the answers to which were just as he'd expected. By this time the caged ox had begun to toss its head in a frenzy, hurling flecks of slobber all the way over to where Quincannon stood. Its bawling increased in volume.

King growled to the bullwhacker, "Hell's fire, Joe, can't you shut that critter up?"

"Tex ain't never took well to a shoein', you know that."

"He ain't the only one."

Joe prodded the animal with his goad, and when that had no effect, he commenced to swearing at it. If anything, this caused the ox's complaints to grow even more frantic.

The smith glared at Joe, at the ox, and then at Quincannon.

"No damn peace in this camp since you showed up," he said aggrievedly. He stalked back to the forge, yanked out the glowing shoe, laid it on his anvil, and began hammering it with a vengeance, as if trying to drown out both the ox's bellows and Joe's steady cussing.

Hank Ransome was away from the settlement, delivering a load of supplies to the logging camp higher up in the mountains. Quincannon went from the teamsters' barn to the mill, avoiding the camp office on the way. Inside the mill, he watched Ben Irons and DuBois's towheaded replacement saw a massive redwood log into board lumber. When they were done and a fresh log was being winched up, he approached Irons and drew him aside.

The setter frowned at his question about DuBois. "What would that Frenchy have that's valuable enough to hide?"

"Something he stole in San Francisco."

"Stole? Well, that don't surprise me none. Money, is it?"

"Expensive jewelry. Three small pieces."

"Don't say. How come you know so much about it?"

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"It's a long story and time is short. I'll explain later. In or near his cabin, would you guess? Or somewhere else in camp?"

"No place else DuBois spent much time, except Okay's cabin and right here in the mill."

"Would he have chanced hiding it here?"

"No spot safe enough. My pick is his cabin."

"Mine, too, but I've searched it twice."

"Maybe he buried it somewhere outside. . . ." Irons paused and then shook his head. "No, not him. He'd be afraid somebody'd see him do it. Got to be *inside*. He'd play that hand like he played his cards—close to the vest, no risks. Hide valuables where he could keep a close eye on 'em, particularly if they was stolen goods."

Cards, Quincannon thought.

Cards!

Half to Irons and half to himself he said, "Last night DuBois all but accused Okay King of doctoring the deck. Not for the first time when he lost?"

"Hell, no. He was always tryin' to blame somebody."

"Did he ever bring his own cards to the game?"

"Time or two."

"Recently?"

"Not since he come back from his sister's funeral."

"Yet he called for a deck last night."

"Yeah, he did. What—?"

Quincannon said, "That's the answer, then," and spun on his heel and hurried out of the mill.

For the third time that morning he entered DuBois's cabin. He went straight to the bunk, hauled out the duffel, and rummaged around inside until he located the sealed box of playing cards. It had the feel of a brand-new deck, and at a casual glance it had the look of one. But on closer inspection he found that the original seal had been pried loose, probably with a knife blade, and then carefully reglued. He slit the seal with his thumbnail, opened the box.

It contained no more than two dozen cards, separated into two halves to help create the illusion of a full deck; and sandwiched tightly between the cards, in a wrapping of tissue paper, were the widow Bennett's brooch, pendant, and diamond ring.

Quincannon offered himself congratulations and at the same time cursed himself for a rattlepate, a difficult feat even for him. An ingenious hiding place, to be sure, but he should have

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inspected the card box more closely on his first search, or at least his second. After all, he was no stranger to the ploy of card mechanics bilking suckers with resealed decks—

Sounds outside. Someone was approaching the cabin.

Swiftly and silently he stood and moved to the wall behind the door. He had just enough time to pocket both the card box and the jewelry, and to unbutton his shirt above the handle of his Navy, before the door swung inward.

The man who entered kicked the door shut behind him without turning. As Quincannon had done minutes earlier, he made straight for DuBois's bunk and knelt beside it. But it wasn't the duffel that he was after. Eager fingers drew out the case containing the four remaining pint bottles of Perry Davis's Pain Killer. He put one of these into the pocket of his mackinaw, was lifting out a second when Quincannon made his presence known.

"Hello, Ned," he said. "Come after the rest of the spoils, have you?"

The bullcook twisted around on one bony knee. His expression in that instant was one of surprise and trapped fear; but in the next, as he recognized Quincannon, he managed to reclaim some of his usual arrogance and bluster. He gained his feet, still clutching the pint of Pain Killer.

"Oh, it's you. The cheater. What're you doin' here?"

"Same as you, Ned. Only it's altogether different spoils that interest me."

"I don't know what you're talkin' about. Foreman sent me down to gather up DuBois's gear. This here Perry Davis ain't gonna do him no good, so I figured I might as well help myself."

"Just as you helped yourself last night, eh?"

"Last night? Wasn't nowhere near here last night."

"Around nine or so," Quincannon said. "Helping yourself to a pint of Pain Killer while DuBois was away playing stud."

"That's a damn lie!"

"Fact. One of several. You told me yesterday you were almost out of jakey and you're a man who sorely needs Demon Rum in one form or another to keep his bones together. You knew DuBois brought a case of Pain Killer back with him from San Francisco; saw him unloading it, likely. And you thought he might not miss one bottle, or wouldn't know for certain who'd pilfered it if he did. But you picked the wrong night, Ned. DuBois left the stud game

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early and caught you at the job. A brief struggle, perhaps, and you sent him to his reward."

"I never did no such thing."

"Hit him with that hammer of yours, I'll wager, and down he went. If he wasn't dead then, you made sure he was by thumping his cranium against the stove."

Nevada Ned's seamed face had lost its color. The look of trapped fear was back in his eyes. "You're crazy as a one-winged jay. DuBois was drunk, he tripped on that coil of rope and fell against the stove and busted his own skull—"

"No, that's how you made it look. After which you took two pints of Pain Killer instead of one and went on your merry way. There were six bottles in the case when I was here yesterday, looking for my spoils, and only four when I searched again earlier."

"The door," Ned said desperately, "the door was barred on the *inside.* You was here when we busted in, you saw that same as everybody else. Wasn't nobody but DuBois could have barred it. Nobody!"

"Except you," Quincannon said. "You and your trusty hammer and one little horseshoe nail—"

Ned threw the pint of Pain Killer at him. Launched it in one sudden, fluid motion, with not even a flicker of his eyes as warning. Quincannon was caught off guard. The bottle fetched him a glancing blow on the cheekbone—if he hadn't twisted his head at the last second it would have struck him squarely between the eyes—and staggered him backwards into the wall. The impact was jarring enough to upset his balance; his right foot slid, then his left, and he toppled to one knee. By the time he lunged upright again, Ned was past him and out the door.

Quincannon wasted breath on a smoldering six-jointed oath, shook his head to clear out the cobwebs, drew his revolver, and gave chase. The bullcook had a fifty-yard lead, running spraddle-legged along the riverbank to the north. Quincannon mowed down an elderberry shrub, but the shrub paid him back by scratching his hands and chin. It also slowed him enough for Ned to add ten more yards to his lead.

"Stop or I'll shoot, you damned blackguard!" Quincannon bellowed, wasting more breath. Nevada Ned threw a look over his shoulder but not even sight of the big revolver broke his stride. Whether he realized it or not, however, he had nowhere to go. The

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river ran too fast here for swimming, if in fact Ned could swim, and the terrain offered neither a hidey hole nor an escape route.

Younger and in better physical condition, Quincannon soon closed the gap between them to thirty yards. Ahead was the mill pond, pole-wielding men wearing steel-calked boots balanced on the floating logs; he couldn't risk a shot that might miss the bullcook and hit one of them. Catch up and tackle him, that was the best way to end the chase. But before he could gain any more ground, Ned veered away from the river at an angle toward the lumberyard and loading dock.

Men working there stopped to watch as Nevada Ned and Quincannon pounded toward them. One shouted something that was lost in the screaming whine of the mill saws, the chuffing of a yard engine on the spur track. The bullcook stumbled around a huge cone of sawdust, and when he dodged between stacks of board and slab lumber, Quincannon lost sight of him. Hell and damn! He put on a burst of speed, reached the stacks, cut through them—and then skidded to a halt.

Ned had pulled up next to a jumble of cut firewood. And in his hands now, drawn up menacingly, was a double-bitted axe.

Quincannon sleeved sweat from his eyes. Both he and Ned were panting like dray horses in the thin mountain air. "Put the axe down," he managed, "and give yourself up. Don't make me shoot you."

"Hell I will! Stay away from me, you heathen murderer!"

Half a dozen burly lumbermen were closing in around them. One called, "What's this all about, Ned?"

"DuBois . . . he didn't die accidental. Cheater here killed him and now he's tryin' to blame it on me."

"So that's your game, is it?" Quincannon said. "Well, it won't work." He drew another ragged breath and said to the others, "I'm not a timekeeper, lads, I'm a detective from San Francisco. Come here undercover to arrest DuBois for theft."

A surprised muttering greeted this pronouncement. Two lumbermen who had been edging closer to Quincannon stopped and held their ground.

"He's lying!" Nevada Ned shouted. *"He's* the thief. He killed DuBois for his stash of Perry Davis's Pain Killer."

Quincannon shifted the Navy to his left hand, and with his right fished the brooch and pendant from his pocket. When he held them high, sunlight glinted off the diamonds and rubies and gold

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settings. Sharp exclamations came from the gathering crowd this time.

"These are what DuBois stole. Ned's the one who murdered him—not for these but for the Pain Killer. One of you fetch Jack Phillips. He'll vouch for who I am."

"No need to fetch me, I'm already here." The foreman appeared at a trot from behind a stack of redwood burls. "Quincannon is who he says he is, all right, a flycop from—"

Phillips didn't finish the sentence because Nevada Ned, trapped and lost and impelled by hate, chose that moment to attack the flycop with his axe.

Again without warning, he rushed forward and swung the weapon in a vicious horizontal arc, as if he were about to fell a sapling. Quincannon twisted aside just in time; the blade sliced air two inches from his jugular. He didn't dare fire the Navy with the workers milling around. Instead, as the bullcook pivoted back toward him, lifting the axe for another swipe, he drove the toe of his boot into Ned's shin, staggering him; then he slammed the Colt's barrel against his knobby wrist. The bone snapped with a dry, brittle sound, like the crack of an old pine cone under a heavy tread. Ned screamed in pain. And the axe dropped harmlessly at his feet.

Phillips shoved up next to Quincannon as some of the others dragged the moaning bullcook away. "By God, that was close. He nearly sliced that blade clean through your neck. Are you all right?"

"Never better," Quincannon lied. "Close, true, but history was on my side, Mr. Phillips."

"History?"

He smiled ruefully. "No member of the Quincannon clan has ever lost his head in a fight."

A short while later, in Phillips's private cubicle, he was feeling his old self again. This was due in large part to the grudging mix of awe, admiration, and respect now being accorded him by the foreman—a mix that grew richer still as he made his explanations.

"When did I first suspect DuBois had been murdered?" he said, leaning back comfortably in his chair. "Why, from the first moment you held the lantern up to his cabin window. I knew it for certain as soon as we were inside."

"Even though the door was barred?"

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"Even though."

"But how, man? How?"

Quincannon applied a fresh match to the tobacco in his pipe. When he had it drawing to his satisfaction he said, "From the position of the body. If DuBois had tripped and fallen against the stove, drunk or sober, he would not have been lying as he was."

"I don't see what—"

"His arms, Mr. Phillips. When a man trips and falls, his instinctive reaction is to throw his arms out in front of him to break the fall. DuBois's should have been outflung *toward* the stove, or at least caught under his body, but they weren't. They were drawn back *along his sides.* Therefore, he hadn't died where he lay—his body had been moved."

"Of course. Now why didn't I notice that myself?"

"You haven't the trained eye of a master detective."

"What else did your trained eye notice?"

"The location of the coil of rope," Quincannon told him. "It was against the wall under the window, a placement where it was unlikely to snare the foot of even a drunkard who was familiar with his surroundings. But much more telling is the fact that in the darkness this morning, even with the aid of your lantern, I couldn't see the coil from outside the window. Nor the loop of rope caught around DuBois's ankle. The angle was wrong and the shadows inside too thick."

"Ah."

"Ah, indeed. When Ned burst into the cookshack he told you it looked as though DuBois had 'tripped on a coil of rope and cracked his skull wide open on the stove'—his exact words. But he couldn't have seen the rope from outside the window any more than I could; he had to've been *inside* the cabin. And if he was inside, then he must be the one who killed DuBois and rearranged the position of the body."

"And the barred door? How did he manage that trick?"

"Oh, it wasn't difficult," Quincannon said. "The trick likely isn't original with him; he's not clever enough to devise spur-of-the-moment subterfuges. I'll wager that somewhere in his travels he saw it done or heard of it being done, and since it takes very little time to arrange and he had all the tools he needed on his person, he seized on it as a way to ensure that DuBois's death would be taken as accidental."

"What tools?" Phillips asked.

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"The hammer in his toolbelt. And a horseshoe nail, which I later found, slightly bent, on the cabin floor. Okay King told me Ned sometimes helped him around the blacksmith's shop; and a bullcook by nature fills his pockets with all manner of miscellaneous items gathered on his rounds."

"True enough. But a hammer and a horseshoe nail . . . that's *all* he used?"

"That's all," Quincannon said. "He drove the nail into the door high up near its outer edge no more than a quarter-inch deep. Then he set one end of the crossbar into the bracket on the hinge side, and rested the bar's other end on the nail. The door could still be opened inward with the bar in that diagonal position. Not far, only a few inches, but far enough for a man as thin as Ned to squeeze through. I found a vertical gouge in the bar where the bracket had cut into it during the squeeze. Once Ned was outside, he had only to pull the door closed once or at the most twice with enough force to dislodge the nail. When the nail bent and fell, the upper end of the bar dropped into the second bracket and completed the seal. As simple as that."

Phillips was shaking his head. "You're a marvel, Quincannon, you really are. How many other detectives could've done what you've done here, and in such a short time?"

Quincannon smiled modestly around the stem of his briar. "None, Mr. Phillips," he said. "Not even Allan Pinkerton himself."

Later that day, after he had returned to Verdi and handed Nevada Ned over to the sheriff there, Quincannon sent a wire to Sabina in San Francisco.

> ARRIVING HOME SIX PM TRAIN TOMORROW STOP DUBOIS MURDERED BUT BAFFLING CRIME SWIFTLY SOLVED AND CULPRIT ARRESTED AFTER FIERCE STRUGGLE STOP ALL BENNETT JEWELRY RECOVERED STOP MASTER DETECTIVE AND DOTING PARTNER SURELY DESERVING OF CELEBRATION AND SPECIAL REWARD COMMA DONT YOU AGREE QM

He had her reply in less than an hour. It said simply and eloquently:

> NO ●

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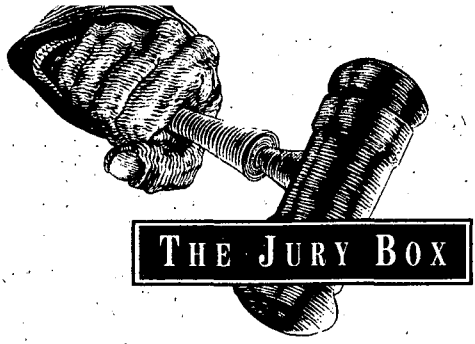

by Jon L. Breen

Though Sir Arthur Conan Doyle wrote only one Christmas story about Sherlock Holmes, "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle," other writers have added several more. One of the best, Robert Richardson's "The Ghost of Christmas Past," is included in *Christmas Crimes* (Signet, $5.99), gathered from the backfiles of *EQMM* and *AHMM* by Cynthia Manson.

Want more accounts of Sherlockian yuletides? *Holmes for the Holidays* (Berkley, $21.95), edited by Martin H. Greenberg, Carol-Lynn Waugh, and Jon L. Lellenberg, fills a whole book with new ones. Especially strong contributions come from Gillian Linscott, Anne Perry, Barbara Paul, Carole Nelson Douglas, Edward D. Hoch, and (with the only courtroom Holmes story I can remember) Carolyn Wheat. Coincidentally, both Loren D. Estleman and Bill Crider ring Holmesian changes on Dickens's *A Christmas Carol,* in stories that, though quite different in other respects, embody a nearly identical central idea. Occasional tongue-in-cheek touches apart, all the contributors play the game straight, resulting in one of the best collections extant of Holmes pastiche and one of the best recent collections of pure detective stories of any kind. (Truth-in-criticism note: I contributed a story of my own to this book. It's pretty good, too.)

August Derleth's Solar Pons saga is the longest series of Holmes pastiches—incidentally, one of the best of them, "The Adventure of the Unique Dickensians," published separately as a chapbook in 1968 and collected in *The Chronicles of Solar Pons* (1973), has a Christmas/Dickens theme. *The Unpublished Solar Pons* (Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library, order from The

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Battered Silicon Dispatch Box, Box 204, Shelburne, Ontario, Canada LON 1SO; $16 U.S., $20 Canadian) contradicts its title in a 500-copy limited edition published late in 1994 but still available. The two complete stories, a third virtually complete, and one fragment were all written early in Derleth's career and, though relatively weak, provide enjoyable looks at a talented storyteller in embryo and are indispensable to the Pontine (or Sherlockian) completist.

The flow of book-length Holmes pastiche continues unabated as new novels continue to involve the Baker Street sleuth with every imaginable event or personage of the late-Victorian and Edwardian period. Here are two well worth recommending.

*** William Seil: *Sherlock Holmes and the Titanic Tragedy,* Breese, $14.95. Holmes and Watson are passengers on the ill-fated 1912 maiden voyage of the Titanic. The plot, involving missing submarine plans, is diverting enough, but the description of the ship and the account of its tragic sinking are beautifully handled. Jacques Futrelle, creator of the Thinking Machine and one of the key figures in American detective fiction, appears in a supporting role as does (more briefly) "ace of spies" Sidney Reilly.

*** Larry Millett: *Sherlock Holmes and the Red Demon,* Viking, $22.95. Holmes and Watson travel to 1994 Minnesota to investigate some attacks on the Great Northern Railway perpetrated by the master arsonist of the title, clues to whose identity are planted with meticulous fairness. The novel culminates in a harrowing account of the disastrous fire that destroyed the town of Hinckley. Ostensibly edited by Millett from a Watson manuscript, the mock-nonfictional volume includes fifteen pages of notes!

**** Peter Robinson: *Innocent Graves,* Berkley, $21.95. In a novel nearly as good as the Edgar-nominated *Wednesday's Child* (1994), small-town Yorkshire cop Alan Banks looks into the murder of a schoolgirl. The smooth style and the complexity of plot and character make quoted evocations of P. D. James and Ruth Rendell credible. In fact, Rendell's Wexford series may be the closest comparison, though Robinson, a Canadian who grew up in Leeds, offers more details of police procedure. (One of Robinson's well-drawn characters is a local vicar's wife, inviting comparison to one of the best mysteries of 1995, Robert Barnard's *The Bad Samaritan* [Penguin, $5.95], concerning a vicar's wife who loses her faith.)

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*** Margaret Maron: *Up Jumps the Devil,* Mysterious, $20. The fourth in the fine series about North Carolina jurist Deborah Knott offers the usual distinctive first-person narrative, more detail about the judge's huge family and other continuing characters, a neat murder plot centered on the threat of development, and (best of all) a continuing account of day-to-day action in a small-town courtroom.

*** Robert K. Tanenbaum: *Falsely Accused,* Dutton, $23.95. In the eighth novel of a compelling series, former New York Assistant D.A. Butch Carp sues the city on behalf of the fired chief medical examiner and gets a chance to go after his former boss, while his pregnant wife Marlene Ciampi helps an old school friend deal with a stalker and creates a new business for herself. For all the violence and corruption depicted, the real subject is parenting. The final revelation proves a real shocker: See if you believe it. (Those who have noted the cinematic qualities of this series will enjoy Marlene's question to Butch: "Do you think our life is becoming too much like a movie?")

*** Kate Wilhelm: *Malice Prepense,* St. Martin's, $24.95. Did Teddy Wendover, a grown man with the mentality and emotional development of a healthy eight-year-old, kill an environmentalist Congressman and two others to avenge the accident that caused his condition? The third case for Oregon lawyer Barbara Holloway shows that the widely admired Wilhelm was well-advised to develop a courtroom specialty. Out-of-court action is solidly professional, but only in the trial Q-and-A does the narrative soar.

*** C. L. Grace: *The Book of Shadows,* St. Martin's, $20.95. Fifteenth-century physician Kathryn Swinbrooke returns to investigate the locked-room murder of a blackmailing magus. Once again Grace (P. C. Doherty) combines historical detail with formal detection in the nearest contemporary equivalent to John Dickson Carr.

** Shari P. Geller: *Fatal Convictions,* ReganBooks/HarperCollins, $24. This first novel about the hunt for a serial killer of convicted (but wrist-slapped) child molesters will keep you guessing and turning the pages, though the characterization is superficial and the surprise climax a bit of a groaner. (Better skip the jacket copy, just in case it proves as criminally overinformative and sometimes inaccurate as the blurb on my advance proof.)

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NEXT ISSUE...

The Ehrengraf Affirmation
BY LAWRENCE BLOCK

The Kneeling Soldier
BY JEFFERY DEAVER

Speak No Evil
BY NANCY PICKARD

No Parking
BY JEFFRY SCOTT

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EQ February '97

QUEEN/HITCHCOCK combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is $4.80 per word—payable in advance ($72.00 minimum). Capitalized words 60¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue please send order and remittance to Diane Addison, Media People, 32 Shepard Road, PO Box 446, Norfolk, CT 06058 or call 1-800-542-5585 or fax to 860-542-6904.

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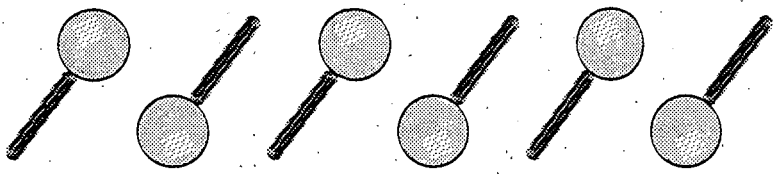

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK AND ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINES

Combo Classified Advertising Order Form

MAIL

DELL MAGAZINES
attn: Francine Moore
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15 WORDS MINIMUM
Only $72.00 for 15 Words or Less.
$4.80 Each Additional Word.
Capitalized Words Add $.60 per Word.

SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the 4th preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear:

PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE

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Firm (Name in Ad) _____

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Basic rate $72.00

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Total amount for 1 ad $ _____

15% Savings With 3 Consecutive Month Discount

a. Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $

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(1) $72.00	(2) $72.00	(3) $72.00	(4) $72.00	(5) $72.00
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(11) $72.00	(12) $72.00	(13) $72.00	(14) $72.00	(15) $72.00
(16) $76.80	(17) $81.60	(18) $86.40	(19) $91.20	(20) $96.00
(21) $100.80	(22) $105.60	(23) $110.40	(24) $115.20	(25) $120.00
(26) $124.80	(27) $129.60	(28) $134 .40	(29) $139.20	(30) $144.00

HOW DO YOU COUNT WORDS? Name and address must be included in counting the number of words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word. City and state count as 1 word each. (Garden City, New York, counts as 2 words.) Zip codes are 1 word. (Mark J. Holly, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020 count as 8 words.) Phone numbers are 1 word. Abbreviations such as COD, FOB, PO, USA, 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. PO Box 145 counts as 2 words.
PLEASE MAKE CHECKS PAYABLE TO DELL MAGAZINES.

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Why pay for cellular phone service if you only want it for emergency use?

The SOS Phone offers a 24-hour call center to connect you with your emergency roadside service, 911 service or family members in the event of an emergency.

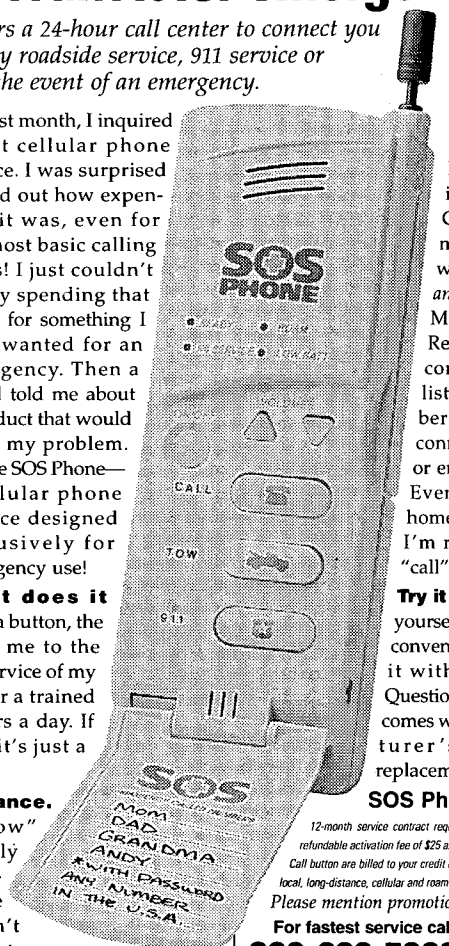
The SOS Phone gives you instant access to the emergency service you need, from towing to 911, even a family member or friend.

Last month, I inquired about cellular phone service. I was surprised to find out how expensive it was, even for the most basic calling plans! I just couldn't justify spending that much for something I only wanted for an emergency. Then a friend told me about a product that would solve my problem. It's the SOS Phone—a cellular phone service designed exclusively for emergency use!

What does it do? With the touch of a button, the SOS Phone connects me to the roadside emergency service of my choice, a 911 service or a trained SOS operator, 24 hours a day. If I need help, I know it's just a phone call away.

Emergency assistance. By pressing the "tow" button, I'll be instantly connected to my emergency roadside service provider. Or, if I don't have one, the SOS operator can recommend one and dispatch them immediately.

The "911" button connects me to the 911 emergency service in my area—best of all, the call is absolutely free!



Personalized service. Each SOS Phone has a serial number that is recorded at the Call Center. Each time I use my phone, the operators will know it's me calling, *and will greet me by name.* My SOS Emergency Record will appear on the computer screen with my list of 10 most-used numbers and the operator will connect me with the person or emergency service I need. Even if I just want to call home to tell my husband that I'm running late, with the "call" button, I can!

Try it yourself. Why not try it yourself? If you don't enjoy its convenience and security, return it within 90 days for a "No Questions Asked" refund. It also comes with a three-year manufacturer's limited repair or replacement warranty.

SOS Phone . . . . $99 $12 S&H

12-month service contract required for this price. Requires a one-time non-refundable activation fee of $25 and a monthly charge of $9.95. Calls made on the Call button are billed to your credit card at $1.45 per minute. (That rate includes all local, long-distance, cellular and roaming fees.) For outgoing calls only.

Please mention promotional code **1788-MG-1541.**

For fastest service call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-238-5322

comtradindustries

2820 Waterford Lake Drive, Suite 102 Midlothian, VA 23113

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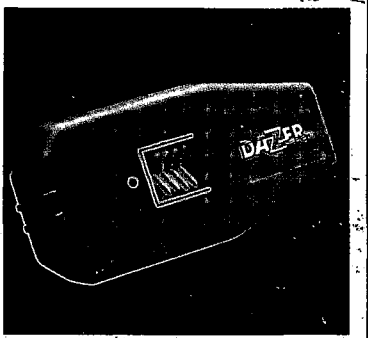
Select Styles Emporium

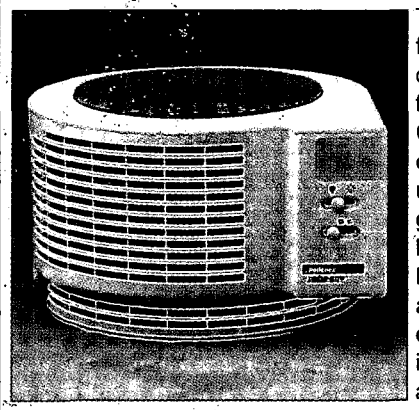
The Ultrasonic Deterrent - The Dazer™

The Dazer is a handheld dog deterrent. Utilizing safe, humane, ultrasound technology the Dazer is a must for joggers, bicyclists, the postman and especially kids and seniors. The Dazer works by producing a discomforting, but not harmful, high frequency sound audible only to dogs. Unlike Mace and other chemical deterrents there is no harm to the animal. It's compact, lightweight and features a belt clip for easy carrying. Shipped with a 9 volt battery. **#2DE202**



$34.98 ($5.95 S&H)

Tabletop IONIZER Air Freshener - with Three Filters



This revolutionary air cleaner uses four technologies to clean, deodorize and eliminate bacteria from the air. First, a High Density Carbon Prefilter traps odors and captures larger particles. Next the unique BioGerm™ filter eliminates germs, including staph and strep bacteria. Then a Hospital Grade HEPA Main Filter removes 99% of all airborne particles (0.3 microns or larger) while the 5 needle ionizer further reduces pollutants and freshens and revitalizes the air. Filters the volume of air in a 12' x 16' room 3x per hour. 110 volts UL Listed **#2DE909**

$129.98 ($11.95 S&H)

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